The Neurodivergent Tween Girl

Celebrating Girls on the Autism Spectrum As They Journey Through the Tween Years

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Introduction

Growing up as an autistic girl can feel like you're living in two worlds at once. There's the world inside your head—full of fascinating interests, big feelings, and your own special way of seeing things—and then there's the outside world, which often seems designed for people whose brains work differently than yours. The tween years, when you're somewhere between being a kid and becoming a teenager, can make this feeling even stronger. But here's the good news: understanding how your autistic brain works can help you navigate both worlds while staying true to who you really are.

I'm Katie Franklin, and I wrote this book because I've learned so much from the autistic people in my life—especially the amazing girls and young women who've shared their experiences with me. I'm not a doctor or therapist, but I've walked alongside autistic loved ones through many of the challenges and celebrations you might be facing right now. This book brings together what I've learned from them, along with insights from autistic adults, researchers, and advocates who understand what it's like to grow up autistic.

This isn't one of those books that tries to teach you how to act "normal" (whatever that means, anyway). Instead, it's about understanding yourself better—how your brain works, why certain things feel harder or easier for you than for other kids, and how to ask for what you need. It's about celebrating the incredible strengths that come with being autistic, while also giving you practical tools for handling the tricky parts.

Throughout this book, we'll explore topics that matter to you right now: understanding your sensory experiences, managing big emotions, building friendships that feel right for you, handling school challenges, and so much more. We'll talk about things like why eye contact might feel uncomfortable, how to deal with overwhelming situations, and ways to communicate what you need to the people around you. Every chapter is designed to help you understand yourself better and feel more confident in who you are.

One important thing to remember: every autistic person is unique. What's true for one autistic girl might be completely different for another. You might read something in this book and think, "Yes! That's exactly how I feel!" Other times, you might think, "Hmm, that's not really me." Both reactions are totally okay. Take what helps you and leave the rest.

You don't have to read this book from start to finish. Feel free to skip around to the chapters that interest you most or that deal with something you're facing right now. Think of it as your personal guide—you're the boss of how you use it.

Being autistic isn't something that needs to be fixed or hidden. It's a fundamental part of who you are, and understanding it can help you feel more comfortable in your own skin. You have unique strengths, perspectives, and gifts that the world needs. This book is here to help you discover them, celebrate them, and use them as you navigate these tween years and beyond.

Welcome to your book. I'm so glad you're here.

Chapter One

Discovering Your Autistic Identity

Embracing Your Unique Brilliance

Understanding What Makes You Uniquely You

Have you ever felt really different from the other kids at school? Maybe you notice things they don't, or you think about the world in ways that seem unusual to them. If so, you're not alone—and there's actually something pretty amazing going on.

Your autistic brain works in cool ways that help you notice things other kids might miss. Like someone who can hear tiny differences in music, or spot patterns that others walk right past, your brain has special abilities that make you uniquely awesome.

Being autistic isn't about being broken or needing to be fixed. It's about having a brain that works differently—and differently can be absolutely brilliant. Think about it: the world needs all kinds of thinkers. If everyone thought exactly the same way, who would come up with new ideas? Who would notice the details that lead to amazing discoveries?

What Does "Autistic" Really Mean?

When we say someone is autistic, we're talking about the way their brain is wired. It's not a disease or something that needs to be cured—it's just a different way of experiencing and interacting with the world.

Here are some things that might be true for you as an autistic person:

- You might have intense interests in specific topics (we call these "special interests," and they're actually one of your superpowers!)
- Your senses might work differently—sounds might seem louder, lights brighter, or textures more noticeable
- You might prefer routines and find sudden changes challenging
- Social situations might feel confusing sometimes, like everyone else got a rulebook you didn't receive
- You might think in pictures, patterns, or very logical ways
- You might feel emotions really intensely, or have trouble figuring out exactly what you're feeling
- You might need time alone to recharge after being around people

Not every autistic person experiences all of these things, and that's okay! Autism looks different for everyone. You're not "more autistic" or "less autistic" based on how many of these you relate to—you're just you, and that's exactly right.

Your Brain's Special Strengths

Let's talk about what your autistic brain does really well. These aren't just nice things to say—they're real strengths that researchers have found in autistic people:

Pattern Recognition: You might be amazing at spotting patterns that others miss. This could mean you're great at puzzles, math, music, or noticing when something is out of place.

Attention to Detail: While other kids might look at the big picture and miss the small stuff, you notice the tiny details. This makes you excellent at things like editing, quality checking, or any task that requires precision.

Deep Focus: When you're interested in something, you can focus on it intensely for long periods. This ability to dive deep into a topic is how experts are made!

Honesty and Directness: You probably value honesty and say what you mean. In a world where people often say one thing but mean another, your straightforward communication is refreshing.

Logical Thinking: Your brain might be really good at following logical rules and systems. This helps with everything from computer programming to understanding how things work.

Strong Memory: Many autistic people have incredible memories, especially for things they're interested in. You might remember facts, conversations, or details from years ago.

Creative Problem-Solving: Because you think differently, you often come up with solutions that no one else considered. Your unique perspective is valuable!

Meet Dallas: A Rock-Solid Identity

Dallas is eleven years old, and she knows more about rocks and minerals than most adults. She can identify dozens of different types of stones just by looking at them, and she's been collecting specimens since she was seven.

At school, some kids think it's weird that Dallas carries a small polished stone in her pocket everywhere she goes. They don't understand why she'd rather spend recess looking at the

gravel in the playground than playing tag. For a while, Dallas tried to hide her interest in geology. She left her favorite rocks at home and pretended to care about the same things as everyone else.

But pretending to be someone else was exhausting. Dallas felt like she was wearing an uncomfortable costume all day long. She wasn't being herself, and it made her feel sad and tired.

Then something changed. Dallas's science teacher asked her to give a presentation about her rock collection. Dallas was nervous, but once she started talking about her specimens—explaining how each one formed, what minerals they contained, and where they came from—something magical happened. Her classmates were actually interested! They asked questions. They wanted to see her collection. A few kids even started bringing her rocks they found to identify.

Dallas realized that her passion for geology wasn't something to hide—it was something that made her special. She stopped pretending to be like everyone else and started being proudly, authentically herself. Sure, not everyone gets why she loves rocks so much, but that's okay. Dallas knows that her intense interest has taught her patience, scientific thinking, and the joy of really knowing something deeply.

Now Dallas wears her favorite stone necklace every day. It reminds her that being different isn't just okay—it's her greatest strength.

P.S. If your special interest is collecting bottle caps or memorizing bus schedules, that's awesome! The world needs people who notice cool stuff others walk right past.

The Power of Special Interests

Let's talk more about special interests, because they're one of the most wonderful parts of being autistic. A special interest is something you're really, really passionate about—so

passionate that you could talk about it for hours, learn everything about it, and never get bored.

Your special interest might be:

- Animals (maybe you know everything about wolves, or you can identify every breed of dog)
- A TV show, book series, or movie (you've watched it dozens of times and notice new details each time)
- A hobby like drawing, coding, or building things
- A subject like space, history, or languages
- Collecting things like stamps, cards, or figurines
- A specific time period, place, or culture

Whatever your special interest is, it's not "just a phase" or "an obsession you need to control." It's a source of joy, comfort, and learning. Your special interest:

- Gives you something to look forward to when life feels hard
- Helps you relax and recharge when you're stressed
- Teaches you how to research, organize information, and become an expert
- Can connect you with other people who share your passion
- Might even turn into a career someday!

Some people might tell you that you talk about your interest "too much" or that you need to "have other hobbies." But here's the truth: your passion and dedication are strengths. The world needs people who care deeply about things and pursue knowledge with enthusiasm.

That said, it's also good to learn when and where to share your special interest. We'll talk more about this in later chapters, but the basic idea is: your interest is wonderful, and learning to read social situations helps you share it in ways that others can appreciate too.

Try This! Create Your Identity Celebration Page

Get a piece of paper or open a document on your computer. This is going to be all about celebrating what makes you uniquely you!

1. **Your Strengths**: Write down three things your autistic brain does really well. Maybe you notice details, remember facts, or think logically. What are YOUR superpowers?

2. **Your Special Interest**: What's the thing you could talk about for hours? Draw it, write about it, or paste pictures of it. Celebrate your passion!

3. **Your Authentic Self**: Write one thing you sometimes hide about yourself, and one reason why it's actually awesome. (Example: "I hide that I don't like loud cafeterias. But actually, having sensitive hearing means I notice beautiful sounds like birds singing that others miss.")

Understanding Masking (And Why You Don't Always Have to Do It)

"Masking" is when you hide your true self to fit in with other kids. It's like wearing an invisible costume that makes you look and act more like non-autistic people expect.

You might be masking when you:

- Force yourself to make eye contact even though it's uncomfortable
- Hold in your excitement about your special interest
- Copy how other kids talk or move

- Pretend to understand social rules you find confusing
- Hide when you're feeling overwhelmed
- Laugh at jokes you don't find funny
- Stay still when your body wants to move or stim

Here's the thing about masking: sometimes it's necessary (like during a test at school when you need to focus), but doing it all the time is exhausting. It's like running a race that never ends. Many autistic people who mask constantly end up feeling burned out, anxious, or like they don't even know who they really are anymore.

You deserve to have places and times where you can just be yourself. That might mean:

- Stimming freely at home (rocking, flapping, spinning—whatever helps you feel good)
- Talking about your special interest with people who appreciate it
- Taking breaks from eye contact when you need to
- Saying "I need a quiet break" instead of forcing yourself to stay in overwhelming situations
- Wearing comfortable clothes instead of what's "cool"

The goal isn't to never mask—sometimes we all adjust our behavior for different situations. The goal is to find a balance where you're not exhausting yourself by pretending to be someone you're not.

Building Your Support Team

Growing up autistic is easier when you have people who understand and support you. Your support team might include:

Family Members: Parents, siblings, or other relatives who learn about autism and help you advocate for what you need.

Friends: Kids who accept you for who you are, share your interests, or are also autistic and "get it."

Teachers and School Staff: Educators who understand that your brain works differently and help create a learning environment where you can succeed.

Therapists or Counselors: Professionals who can teach you skills and strategies while respecting your autistic identity.

Online Communities: Forums, social media groups, or websites where autistic people connect and support each other.

Mentors: Older autistic teens or adults who can show you that growing up autistic leads to a great life.

You don't need a huge team—even one or two people who truly understand you can make a big difference. And remember, you're also part of your own support team! Learning about yourself and advocating for your needs is one of the most important things you can do.

Let's Explore: Who's On Your Team?

Think about the people in your life right now:

- Who makes you feel accepted for who you are?
- Who can you talk to when you're having a hard time?
- Who celebrates your special interests with you?
- Who helps you when things feel overwhelming?

If you can't think of many people, that's okay—building your support team is something you can work on. Start by identifying one person (maybe a parent, teacher, or school counselor) who you could talk to about being autistic and what you need.

Your Autistic Identity Is Something to Celebrate

Here's what we want you to remember from this chapter: Being autistic is not something to be ashamed of or hide. It's a fundamental part of who you are, and it comes with real strengths and abilities.

Yes, being autistic in a world designed for non-autistic people can be challenging. You might face misunderstandings, sensory overload, or social confusion. But these challenges don't define you—your strengths, interests, passions, and unique way of seeing the world do.

As you grow up, you'll learn strategies to handle the hard parts. You'll find your people—other autistic individuals and allies who appreciate you. You'll discover careers and hobbies that let your autistic strengths shine. And most importantly, you'll learn to be proud of who you are.

Your autistic identity isn't something to overcome or cure. It's something to understand, embrace, and celebrate. You're not a broken version of a non-autistic person—you're a perfect version of you.

Welcome to your journey of self-discovery. It's going to be amazing.

Chapter Two

Sensory Superpowers

Understanding Your Unique Sensory World

Your Senses Work Differently (And That's Powerful!)

Close your eyes for a moment and think about everything you can sense right now. What do you hear? Feel? Smell? For you, these sensations might be much more intense than they are for other kids—or sometimes much less noticeable. This is because your autistic brain processes sensory information differently.

Think of your senses like volume controls on a stereo. For some autistic people, certain senses are turned way up—sounds are louder, lights are brighter, touches feel more intense. For others, some senses are turned down—they might not notice when they're hungry, cold, or even hurt. And for many autistic people, it's a mix: some senses are super-sensitive while others are under-sensitive.

Understanding how your senses work is like getting the instruction manual for your own brain. Once you know what makes you comfortable or uncomfortable, you can start creating a life that feels good instead of overwhelming.

The Eight Senses (Yes, Eight!)

Most people learn about five senses in school: sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell. But there are actually three more that are super important, especially for autistic people:

The Five You Know:

1. **Sight (Visual)**: How you see light, colors, movement, and patterns
2. **Hearing (Auditory)**: How you process sounds and noise
3. **Touch (Tactile)**: How you feel textures, temperatures, and physical contact
4. **Taste (Gustatory)**: How you experience flavors and food textures
5. **Smell (Olfactory)**: How you notice and react to scents

The Three You Might Not Know:

1. **Body Position (Proprioception)**: This sense tells you where your body parts are in space. It's why you can touch your nose with your eyes closed. Some autistic people have trouble with this sense, which might make them seem clumsy or cause them to bump into things.
2. **Balance and Movement (Vestibular)**: This sense, located in your inner ear, tells you if you're moving, spinning, or tilted. It's why some autistic people love swinging or spinning, while others get dizzy easily.
3. **Internal Body Signals (Interoception)**: This sense tells you what's happening inside your body—if you're hungry, need the bathroom, feel hot or cold, or have a fast heartbeat. Many autistic people have trouble with this sense, which means they might not notice these signals until they're extreme.

Sensory Sensitivity: When Everything Feels Like Too Much

If you're sensory sensitive (also called "hypersensitive"), your senses pick up more information than most people's do. It's like having super-powered hearing, sight, or touch—which sounds cool but can actually be really overwhelming.

Signs you might be sensory sensitive:

- Certain sounds (like the school bell, vacuum cleaners, or people chewing) feel physically painful
- Bright lights or fluorescent lighting give you headaches or make you feel anxious
- Tags in clothes, certain fabrics, or light touches feel irritating or unbearable
- Strong smells (perfume, cafeteria food, cleaning products) make you feel sick
- Busy, crowded places feel overwhelming and exhausting
- You notice background noises that other people don't even hear
- Certain food textures make you gag, even if the taste is okay

Meet Amelia: Navigating the Sensory Storm

Amelia is ten years old, and going to the mall with her family used to be her least favorite thing in the world. The bright fluorescent lights felt like they were drilling into her brain. The mix of perfume from the department store, food smells from the court, and cleaning products from the bathrooms made her stomach hurt. The background music, combined with hundreds of conversations, cash registers beeping, and babies crying, created a wall of noise that made it hard to think.

By the time her family finished shopping, Amelia would be on the verge of tears. Her parents thought she was being difficult or dramatic. Amelia thought something was wrong with her—why couldn't she handle something that seemed easy for everyone else?

Then Amelia learned about sensory sensitivity. She realized her brain wasn't broken—it was just processing more sensory information than other people's brains. Armed with this knowledge, Amelia and her parents came up with a plan:

- Amelia wears her noise-reducing headphones at the mall
- She brings a small bottle of a scent she likes (lavender) to smell when other odors get overwhelming
- She wears her most comfortable clothes and sunglasses
- Her family takes breaks where Amelia can sit quietly in a less busy area
- They plan shorter shopping trips instead of spending hours at the mall

Now mall trips are manageable. Amelia still doesn't love them, but she doesn't end up overwhelmed and melting down anymore. Understanding her sensory needs changed everything.

Sensory Seeking: When You Need More Input

Some autistic people are "sensory seekers" (also called "hyposensitive"). This means their senses need more input to feel satisfied. It's like their sensory volume is turned down, so they seek out experiences that turn it up.

Signs you might be a sensory seeker:

- You love loud music, action movies, or noisy environments
- You seek out strong flavors (very spicy, sour, or intensely flavored foods)

- You love spinning, swinging, jumping, or crashing into things
- You touch everything—textures, fabrics, objects
- You might not notice when you're hurt, hungry, or need the bathroom
- You love tight hugs, heavy blankets, or pressure
- You make noises, hum, or talk to yourself for the sensory input
- You fidget constantly and have trouble sitting still

Being a sensory seeker isn't bad—it just means you need to find safe, appropriate ways to get the sensory input your brain craves. This might mean:

- Having a trampoline or swing at home
- Chewing gum or using chewable jewelry
- Listening to music with headphones
- Using a weighted blanket
- Playing with fidget toys
- Doing physical activities like dancing, sports, or climbing

The Mixed Bag: When You're Both

Here's something important: you don't have to be all sensitive or all seeking. Many autistic people are sensitive to some things and seeking for others. For example, you might:

- Hate loud, sudden noises but love listening to your favorite music at high volume
- Dislike light touches but crave deep pressure hugs

- Be picky about food textures but love strong, spicy flavors
- Need to fidget and move but get overwhelmed in crowded, chaotic places

This is totally normal! Your sensory profile is unique to you, and understanding it means paying attention to what makes you feel good versus what makes you feel overwhelmed.

Building Your Sensory Tool Kit

Now that you understand how your senses work, let's build a toolkit of strategies and items that can help you feel comfortable and regulated throughout your day.

For Sensory Sensitivity (When Things Feel Like Too Much):

Sound:

- Noise-reducing or noise-canceling headphones
- Earplugs or earmuffs
- White noise apps or machines
- Listening to calming music
- Finding quiet spaces to take breaks

Pro tip: If your noise-canceling headphones are so big they make you look like a pilot, own it! You're piloting your own comfort zone.

Sight:

- Sunglasses (even indoors if needed)
- Hats or visors to block overhead lights

- Dimmer switches or lamps instead of overhead lighting
- Blue light filters on screens
- Avoiding fluorescent lights when possible

Touch:

- Removing tags from clothes
- Wearing soft, comfortable fabrics
- Having a "safe" outfit that always feels good
- Using your own towels and bedding
- Keeping hand lotion or sanitizer you like the feel of

Smell:

- A small bottle of a scent you like to smell when others are overwhelming
- Scent-free products when possible
- Asking family members to avoid strong perfumes
- Eating in less smelly areas of the cafeteria

Taste/Food:

- Having "safe foods" that always feel okay to eat
- Not forcing yourself to eat foods with textures you can't handle
- Trying new foods in small amounts without pressure
- Understanding that being a "picky eater" might be sensory, not behavioral

For Sensory Seeking (When You Need More Input):

Movement:

- Fidget toys, spinners, or cubes
- Taking movement breaks (jumping jacks, running in place)
- Sitting on a wobble cushion or exercise ball
- Swinging, spinning, or rocking
- Dancing or doing physical activities

Touch/Pressure:

- Weighted blankets or lap pads
- Tight hugs or pressure vests
- Chewable jewelry or gum
- Playing with slime, putty, or clay
- Wrapping yourself in blankets

Sound:

- Listening to your favorite music
- Making sounds, humming, or singing
- Using apps with satisfying sounds
- Playing musical instruments

Taste:

- Keeping strong-flavored snacks available (mints, sour candy, spicy foods)
- Chewing gum
- Drinking flavored water or tea

Try This! Design Your Dream Sensory Space

If you could design one room in your house to be perfectly comfortable for your sensory needs, what would it include? Think about:

1. Lighting: Bright, dim, colored, natural?
2. Sounds: Silent, music, white noise, nature sounds?
3. Furniture: Bean bags, hammock, regular chairs, floor cushions?
4. Textures: Soft blankets, smooth surfaces, interesting fabrics?
5. Activities: Books, art supplies, fidgets, music?

Draw or write about your dream sensory space. Then see if you can create a small version of it—even just a corner of your room with your favorite sensory items.

Your Sensory Success Map

Understanding your sensory needs is an ongoing process. What bothers you might change depending on how tired you are, how stressed you feel, or even what time of day it is. That's okay! The goal is to start noticing patterns so you can predict and prepare.

Try keeping a simple sensory journal for a week:

- What sensory experiences felt good today?
- What felt overwhelming or uncomfortable?
- What tools or strategies helped?

- What do you want to try tomorrow?

You don't need to write a lot—even just a few words or drawings can help you see patterns.

Sensory Overload: When It All Becomes Too Much

Even with the best tools and strategies, sometimes sensory input becomes overwhelming. This is called sensory overload, and it can lead to meltdowns or shutdowns.

Signs of sensory overload:

- Feeling irritable, anxious, or panicky
- Having trouble thinking clearly or making decisions
- Feeling like you need to escape
- Covering your ears or eyes
- Feeling like you might cry or scream
- Wanting to be alone immediately

What to do when you feel overload coming:

1. Remove yourself from the situation if possible (go to a quiet room, bathroom, or outside)
2. Use your sensory tools (headphones, sunglasses, fidgets)
3. Do deep breathing or other calming techniques
4. Give yourself time to recover—don't rush back into the overwhelming situation

5. Tell someone you trust that you need a break

What to do if you can't leave:

- Close your eyes or look down
- Use breathing techniques
- Hold a comforting object
- Count or think about your special interest
- Remember that the feeling will pass

Advocating for Your Sensory Needs

As you get older, you'll need to explain your sensory needs to teachers, friends, and other people in your life. This is called self-advocacy, and it's an important skill.

How to explain your sensory needs:

Instead of: *"I can't handle this."*

Try: *"The noise level is really overwhelming for me. Could I take a break or use my headphones?"*

Instead of: *"This is stupid."*

Try: *"The fluorescent lights give me headaches. Is there a different place I could sit or could I wear my sunglasses?"*

Instead of: *"I don't want to."*

Try: *"That texture is really uncomfortable for me. Is there an alternative I could try?"*

Most people want to help—they just need to understand what you need and why. Being specific and calm (when possible) helps them support you better.

Time to Practice: Create Your Sensory Emergency Kit

Put together a small bag or box with items that help you when you're feeling overwhelmed. This is your sensory emergency kit, and you can keep it in your backpack, locker, or room.

Your kit might include:

- Headphones or earplugs
- Sunglasses
- A fidget toy
- A small stress ball or putty
- A piece of soft fabric or a small stuffed animal
- Gum or mints
- A list of calming strategies that work for you
- A small bottle of a scent you like

Having these items ready means you don't have to think about what to do when you're already overwhelmed—you just grab your kit and use what helps.

Your Sensory Superpowers

Yes, having different sensory processing can be challenging. But it also gives you abilities that other people don't have:

- You might notice details in art, music, or nature that others miss
- Your sensitivity might make you more empathetic to others' discomfort
- Your ability to focus on sensory details might make you great at quality control, editing, or design work
- Your sensory seeking might make you adventurous and willing to try new experiences
- Your awareness of your body and environment might keep you safer

Your sensory differences aren't flaws—they're part of what makes you uniquely you. Understanding them and learning to work with them (instead of against them) is one of the most important things you can do for yourself.

Remember: You're not "too sensitive" or "too much." You're exactly right, and you deserve to feel comfortable in your own body and environment. Keep learning about your sensory needs, keep advocating for yourself, and keep building your toolkit. You've got this!

Chapter Three

Emotional Intelligence for Autistic Girls

Naming, Understanding, and Managing Your Feelings

Your Emotional World Is Valid and Real

Feelings can be confusing for everyone, but for many autistic people, emotions can feel especially complicated. You might feel things very intensely—like someone turned up the volume on your emotions. Or you might have trouble figuring out exactly what you're feeling. Sometimes feelings are like a mystery pizza delivery—you're not sure what toppings you ordered, but something definitely just arrived and it's BIG.

Being autistic means you might feel emotions more intensely than other kids—like someone turned up the volume. That's not bad! It means you experience things deeply, which can be both amazing and overwhelming.

Here's what's important to know: Your feelings are real and valid, even if you can't always name them or if they seem "too big" compared to what caused them. Learning to understand and manage your emotions isn't about making them smaller or "more normal"—it's about understanding what you're feeling and finding healthy ways to express and handle those feelings.

The Challenge of Naming Feelings

Some autistic people have trouble naming their feelings—there's even a fancy word for it (alexithymia)—but we'll just call it "trouble finding the right words for feelings." If this sounds like you, you might:

- Know you feel "bad" or "good" but can't get more specific than that
- Feel physical sensations (stomach ache, tight chest, racing heart) but not connect them to emotions
- Have trouble explaining to others what you're feeling
- Feel confused when people ask "How do you feel about that?"
- Experience emotions as overwhelming waves without clear labels

This doesn't mean you don't have feelings—you absolutely do! It just means the connection between feeling something and naming it doesn't come automatically. The good news is that this is a skill you can develop with practice.

Meet Jasmine: Learning to Name the Feeling Storm

Jasmine is eleven, and for most of her life, she only knew three feelings: fine, bad, and really bad. When her mom asked how she felt about something, Jasmine would shrug and say "fine" because she didn't know what else to say.

But "fine" wasn't always accurate. Sometimes Jasmine felt excited but couldn't name it. Sometimes she felt disappointed, frustrated, or worried, but they all just felt like "bad" to

her. This made it hard for Jasmine to explain what she needed or to understand why she sometimes felt overwhelmed.

Jasmine's school counselor introduced her to a feelings wheel—a circular chart with lots of different emotion words organized by category. At first, Jasmine thought it was silly. But then she started using it every day, just checking in with herself and trying to find a word that matched what she felt.

Slowly, Jasmine's emotional vocabulary grew. She learned that the tight feeling in her chest when her routine changed was "anxious." The warm, energized feeling when she talked about her special interest was "enthusiastic." The heavy, tired feeling after a hard day was "drained."

Now, Jasmine still uses her feelings wheel sometimes, but she's gotten much better at naming her emotions. And once she could name them, she could start figuring out what to do about them.

Building Your Emotional Vocabulary

Let's expand your feelings vocabulary beyond "good," "bad," "fine," and "okay." Here are some common emotions, organized by family:

The Happiness Family:

- Content (peaceful and satisfied)
- Excited (energized and looking forward to something)
- Proud (feeling good about something you did)
- Grateful (thankful for something)
- Joyful (very happy and light)

- Relieved (glad something stressful is over)

The Sadness Family:

- Disappointed (let down when something didn't go as hoped)
- Lonely (missing connection with others)
- Hurt (emotionally wounded by something someone said or did)
- Discouraged (feeling like giving up)
- Grief (deep sadness about a loss)

The Anger Family:

- Frustrated (blocked from doing what you want)
- Irritated (annoyed by small things)
- Resentful (angry about something unfair)
- Furious (very, very angry)

The Fear Family:

- Worried (concerned something bad might happen)
- Anxious (nervous and on edge)
- Scared (afraid of something specific)
- Overwhelmed (feeling like everything is too much)
- Panicked (intense fear and need to escape)

The Confusion Family:

- Uncertain (not sure what to think or do)

- Conflicted (feeling two opposite things at once)
- Surprised (caught off guard)
- Curious (wanting to know more)

Your Detective Work: Connecting Body Sensations to Emotions

Since many autistic people feel emotions in their bodies before they can name them, learning to recognize your body's signals can help you identify feelings.

Common body-emotion connections:

- Tight chest, fast heartbeat, shallow breathing = *Anxiety, fear, or excitement*
- Heavy feeling, low energy, wanting to sleep = *Sadness or depression*
- Hot face, clenched jaw or fists, tense muscles = *Anger or frustration*
- Stomach ache, nausea = *Anxiety, fear, or disgust*
- Light, energized, warm feeling = *Happiness or excitement*
- Shaky, jittery, can't sit still = *Anxiety, excitement, or overstimulation*

Start paying attention to what your body does when you feel different emotions. Everyone's body signals are a little different, so your personal emotion-body map might not match these exactly.

Try This! Create Your Personal Feelings Chart

Get a piece of paper and divide it into sections. For each emotion you commonly feel, write:

1. The emotion name
2. What it feels like in your body
3. What usually causes this feeling
4. What helps when you feel this way

For example: *Anxious*

- Body: Tight chest, stomach ache, can't focus
- Causes: Changes in routine, social situations, tests
- What helps: Deep breathing, talking to my mom, spending time with my cat

The Intensity Problem: When Feelings Feel Too Big

Many autistic people experience emotions more intensely than non-autistic people. What might be a small disappointment for someone else might feel devastating to you. A minor frustration might feel like overwhelming rage. A happy moment might feel like the best thing that's ever happened.

This isn't you being "dramatic" or "overreacting." Your brain genuinely processes emotions more intensely. Understanding this can help you be more patient with yourself and help others understand why you react the way you do.

Strategies for managing intense emotions:

1. The Feelings Scale: Rate your emotions on a scale of 1-10. This helps you recognize when feelings are building before they become overwhelming.

- 1-3: Mild (I notice it, but it's manageable)
- 4-6: Moderate (It's affecting me, and I need to pay attention)
- 7-9: Strong (I need to use coping strategies now)
- 10: Overwhelming (I need help or need to remove myself from the situation)

2. The Pause Button: When you notice a feeling getting intense, imagine pressing a pause button. Take three deep breaths before reacting. This tiny pause can help you respond instead of just reacting.

3. The Zoom Out: Ask yourself: "Will this matter in a week? A month? A year?" This doesn't make your feelings less valid, but it can help you get perspective on whether the intensity matches the situation.

4. The Feelings Timer: Remind yourself that feelings are temporary. Even the most intense emotion will eventually decrease. You might say to yourself: "This feeling is really strong right now, but it won't last forever. I can handle this for a little while."

Meet Zara: Riding the Emotional Waves

Zara is twelve, and she feels everything intensely. When her best friend couldn't come to her birthday party, Zara cried for hours—it felt like the worst thing that had ever happened. When she got a good grade on a test, she was so excited she couldn't sleep that night. When her mom said they couldn't get a dog, Zara felt angry for days.

Zara's parents sometimes got frustrated with her "overreactions." They'd say things like "It's not that big a deal" or "You need to calm down." But to Zara, it WAS a big deal. Her feelings were huge and real, and being told they were wrong just made her feel worse.

Then Zara learned about emotional intensity in autistic people. She realized she wasn't broken or dramatic—her brain just processed emotions differently. She started using the feelings scale to track her emotions and notice when they were building. She learned breathing techniques and found that drawing helped her process intense feelings.

Most importantly, Zara learned to tell people: "I know this might not seem like a big deal to you, but my feelings are really intense right now. I'm not overreacting—this is just how my brain works. I need some time to process this."

Understanding her emotional intensity didn't make Zara's feelings less intense, but it helped her manage them better and helped others understand her better too.

Emotional Regulation: Tools for Managing Big Feelings

Emotional regulation doesn't mean controlling or suppressing your feelings. It means understanding them and having strategies to handle them in healthy ways.

Calming Strategies for Overwhelming Emotions:

Physical Strategies:

- Deep breathing (breathe in for 4 counts, hold for 4, out for 4)
- Progressive muscle relaxation (tense and release each muscle group)
- Exercise or movement (running, dancing, jumping)
- Cold water on your face or holding ice
- Weighted blanket or tight hug

Mental Strategies:

- Counting backwards from 100

- Naming things you can see, hear, and touch (grounding technique)
- Thinking about your special interest
- Imagining a calm, safe place
- Positive self-talk ("I can handle this," "This feeling will pass")

Creative Strategies:

- Drawing or painting your feelings
- Writing in a journal
- Listening to music
- Playing an instrument
- Building or creating something

Social Strategies:

- Talking to someone you trust
- Asking for a hug
- Spending time with a pet
- Texting a friend
- Being near someone without having to talk

Let's Explore: Build Your Calm-Down Kit

Just like your sensory emergency kit, you can create a calm-down kit for emotional overwhelm. Include:

- A list of your favorite calming strategies
- Items that help you feel calm (stress ball, fidget, soft fabric)
- Photos of people, pets, or places that make you happy
- A playlist of calming music
- Encouraging notes to yourself

Understanding Emotional Triggers

A trigger is something that causes a strong emotional reaction. For autistic people, common triggers might include:

- Changes in routine or unexpected events
- Sensory overload
- Social misunderstandings or conflicts
- Feeling misunderstood or not believed
- Transitions (ending one activity and starting another)
- Feeling rushed or pressured
- Criticism or correction
- Injustice or unfairness

Identifying your triggers helps you prepare for them or avoid them when possible. If you know that transitions are hard for you, you can build in extra time and use strategies to make them easier. If you know that loud environments trigger anxiety, you can bring your headphones.

Your Mission: Track Your Triggers

For one week, notice what situations or events lead to strong emotions. Write down:

- What happened
- How you felt
- How intense the feeling was (1-10)
- What you did

After a week, look for patterns. Are there certain situations that consistently trigger strong emotions? Once you know your triggers, you can start planning for them.

Expressing Emotions in Healthy Ways

Having feelings is normal and healthy. But how you express them matters—both for your wellbeing and for your relationships with others.

Healthy ways to express emotions:

- Using words to explain how you feel
- Asking for what you need
- Taking space when you need it
- Using creative outlets (art, music, writing)
- Physical activity
- Talking to someone you trust

Unhealthy ways that might feel good in the moment but cause problems:

- Hurting yourself or others
- Breaking things
- Saying cruel things you don't mean
- Completely shutting down and refusing all help

- Bottling everything up until you explode

If you find yourself using unhealthy coping strategies, that's okay—you're learning. The goal is to gradually replace unhealthy strategies with healthy ones. This takes time and practice.

Quick Challenge: Create Your Emotion Scripts

Sometimes when you're feeling intense emotions, it's hard to find the right words. Creating scripts ahead of time can help. Write down what you could say for different situations:

When you're overwhelmed: "I'm feeling really overwhelmed right now. I need [quiet time/a break/to be alone] for a little while."

When you're upset but don't know why: "I'm feeling really upset, but I'm not sure exactly why yet. Can I have some time to figure it out?"

When someone hurt your feelings: "When you [specific action], I felt [emotion]. I need you to know that hurt me."

When you need help: "I'm having a hard time managing my feelings right now. Can you help me?"

Meltdowns vs. Tantrums: Understanding the Difference

People sometimes confuse autistic meltdowns with tantrums, but they're very different.

A tantrum is a deliberate behavior to get something you want. It stops when you get what you want or realize it's not working.

A meltdown is a loss of control that happens when you're completely overwhelmed. It's not a choice, and it doesn't stop just because you get what you want. Meltdowns happen when your brain and body are overloaded and can't cope anymore.

Signs of an approaching meltdown:

- Increasing irritability
- Difficulty thinking clearly
- Sensory sensitivity increasing
- Feeling trapped or desperate
- Physical signs (shaking, crying, rapid breathing)

What to do if you feel a meltdown coming:

1. Remove yourself from the situation if possible
2. Get to a safe, quiet space
3. Use your strongest calming strategies
4. Don't try to "push through"—give yourself permission to take a break
5. Ask for help if you need it

After a meltdown:

- Be gentle with yourself—meltdowns are exhausting
- Rest and recover
- Think about what triggered it (when you're ready)
- Don't feel ashamed—meltdowns happen, and they don't mean you're bad or broken

Meet Florence: Preventing Overwhelm Before It Starts

Florence is ten years old, and she used to have meltdowns almost every day after school. By the time she got home, she was so overwhelmed from holding it together all day that she would explode—crying, yelling, and sometimes throwing things.

Florence's parents were worried and frustrated. They didn't understand why she could "behave" at school but fell apart at home. Florence felt terrible about her meltdowns but couldn't seem to stop them.

Then Florence and her parents learned about autistic meltdowns and the importance of prevention. They realized Florence was masking all day at school, using all her energy to appear "normal." By the time she got home, she had nothing left. Sound familiar? Let's learn how to avoid that overwhelmed feeling before it even starts.

Florence and her family made some changes:

- Florence started taking sensory breaks during the school day (going to the quiet corner of the library)
- She used her headphones during lunch and between classes
- She stopped trying to socialize during recess and instead spent that time recharging alone
- After school, she had 30 minutes of quiet time in her room before any homework or activities
- Her parents stopped asking her questions right after school, giving her time to decompress

Within a few weeks, Florence's meltdowns decreased dramatically. She still had them occasionally, but not every day. Learning to prevent overwhelm instead of just dealing with it after the fact changed everything.

Building Emotional Resilience

Emotional resilience doesn't mean you don't feel things intensely or that you never get overwhelmed. It means you have strategies to cope, you can recover from difficult emotions, and you trust yourself to handle what comes.

Ways to build emotional resilience:

1. **Practice self-compassion**: Talk to yourself the way you'd talk to a good friend. Be kind and understanding, not harsh and critical.
2. **Celebrate small wins**: Notice when you handle a difficult emotion well, even if it's not perfect. Progress matters more than perfection.
3. **Learn from challenges**: After a difficult emotional experience, think about what you learned. What worked? What didn't? What will you try next time?
4. **Build your support system**: Having people who understand and support you makes emotional challenges easier to handle.
5. **Take care of your body**: Sleep, nutrition, and exercise all affect your emotional regulation. Taking care of your physical health supports your emotional health.
6. **Keep practicing**: Emotional regulation is a skill that improves with practice. Every time you use a strategy, you're building your emotional resilience.

Your Emotional Journey

Understanding and managing emotions is a lifelong journey, not a destination. You won't "master" emotions and be done—you'll keep learning about yourself, discovering new strategies, and growing in your emotional awareness.

Remember:

- Your feelings are valid, even when they're intense

- Having trouble naming feelings doesn't mean you don't have them
- Emotional intensity is part of being autistic, not a flaw
- Meltdowns aren't failures—they're signs you need more support or prevention strategies
- You can learn to understand and manage your emotions while still being authentically you

Be patient with yourself. Emotional intelligence takes time to develop, and that's okay. You're doing great just by learning about this and trying new strategies. Keep going—you've got this!

Chapter Four

Designing Your Daily Reset Routine

Self-Care Strategies That Actually Work

Why Self-Care Matters (Especially for Autistic Girls)

You've probably heard adults talk about "self-care" before. Maybe it sounded boring or like something only grown-ups need to worry about. But here's the truth: self-care is especially important for autistic people, and learning about it now will make your life so much better.

Think about your phone or tablet. When you use it all day, the battery drains. If you don't charge it, it eventually dies and stops working. Your brain and body are similar—you use energy throughout the day, and you need to recharge. For autistic people, daily life often drains your battery faster than it drains other kids' batteries. That's why having a reset routine is so important.

Self-care isn't selfish, and it's not just about bubble baths and face masks (though those can be nice!). Real self-care means understanding what drains your energy, what recharges you, and building routines that help you feel your best.

What Drains Your Battery?

For autistic people, lots of everyday activities use more energy than they do for non-autistic kids. Understanding what drains you helps you plan for recharging.

Common energy drains:

- **Masking**: Pretending to fit in or hiding your autistic traits takes enormous energy
- **Sensory overload**: Being in overwhelming environments drains you quickly
- **Social interaction**: Even fun social time can be exhausting (this doesn't mean you don't like people—it just means socializing takes energy)
- **Transitions**: Switching from one activity to another uses mental energy
- **Unexpected changes**: When things don't go as planned, your brain has to work extra hard to adjust
- **Emotional intensity**: Feeling big emotions is exhausting
- **Cognitive demands**: School, homework, and learning new things require lots of mental energy
- **Lack of routine**: Not knowing what to expect or when things will happen is draining

Notice that many of these things aren't "bad"—they're just energy-intensive. You might love spending time with friends, but it still drains your battery. Understanding this helps you plan for recharge time.

What Recharges Your Battery?

Just as important as knowing what drains you is knowing what recharges you. These are activities that help you feel restored, calm, and energized.

Common recharge activities for autistic people:

- **Alone time**: Time by yourself without having to interact or mask
- **Special interests**: Engaging with your passion gives you energy instead of taking it
- **Sensory comfort**: Being in an environment that feels good to your senses
- **Routine and predictability**: Knowing what to expect is calming
- **Stimming**: Moving your body in ways that feel good (rocking, flapping, spinning, etc.)
- **Creative activities**: Drawing, writing, building, crafting
- **Nature**: Being outside in calm, natural environments
- **Animals**: Spending time with pets
- **Physical activity**: Exercise that you enjoy (not forced exercise)
- **Rest**: Sometimes you just need to lie down and do nothing

Your recharge activities might be different from these—that's okay! The important thing is figuring out what works for YOU.

Meet Sophie: Finding Her Creative Reset

Sophie is twelve years old and loves digital art and drawing. She can spend hours working on a single illustration, perfecting every detail and experimenting with different techniques. Her sketchbook and tablet are her most prized possessions.

For a long time, Sophie felt guilty about how much time she spent on her art. Her parents worried she was "isolating herself" and encouraged her to spend more time with friends or doing other activities. Sophie tried to follow their advice, but she felt exhausted and irritable when she didn't have time for her long drawing sessions.

Then Sophie learned about energy management and recharge activities. She realized that her art wasn't just a hobby—it was how she recharged her battery. The detailed, focused process of creating art helped her reset and recharge after draining days at school.

Sophie explained this to her parents, and they understood. Now, after school, Sophie has dedicated art time. She sets up her space with her favorite art supplies organized just the way she likes them, puts on soft piano music, and draws. This routine helps her transition from the overwhelming school day to a calm evening.

Sophie also created what she calls her "Creative Calm Kit"—a small bag with her favorite art pencils, a mini sketchbook, and some erasers. When she's feeling overwhelmed during the day, she can pull out her kit and do some quick sketching to help herself feel better.

Understanding that her artistic process was actually her emotional regulation strategy changed everything for Sophie. She stopped feeling guilty about needing that time and started protecting it as essential self-care.

Designing Your Personal Reset Routine

A reset routine is a set of activities you do regularly to recharge your battery. It might be something you do every day after school, before bed, or on weekends. The key is making it consistent and personalized to your needs.

Steps to create your reset routine:

1. Identify your energy patterns: When during the day do you feel most drained? After school? After social events? In the evening? This is when you need your reset routine most.

2. Choose your recharge activities: Pick 3-5 activities that help you feel restored. Make sure they're realistic and actually recharging (not just things you think you "should" do).

3. Create the right environment: Think about the sensory environment you need. Quiet or music? Bright or dim lighting? Alone or with a pet?

4. Set boundaries: Protect your reset time. This might mean telling family members you need 30 minutes alone, or putting a sign on your door.

5. Make it consistent: Try to do your reset routine at the same time each day. Consistency helps your brain and body know when to expect recharge time.

Example Reset Routines:

After-School Reset (30 minutes):

- Change into comfortable clothes
- Have a snack
- Spend 20 minutes on special interest
- Do some gentle stretching or stimming
- Prepare for evening activities

Before-Bed Reset (45 minutes):

- Dim the lights
- Take a warm shower
- Put on soft pajamas
- Read or listen to calming music
- Write in journal (optional)
- Do breathing exercises

Weekend Recharge (2 hours):

- Sleep in or rest
- Engage deeply with special interest
- Spend time in nature or with pets

- Creative activity
- No social obligations or demands

Time to Practice: Design Your Reset Routine

Create your own reset routine by answering these questions:

1. When do you most need to recharge?
2. What three activities help you feel most restored?
3. What sensory environment do you need?
4. How much time do you need?
5. What boundaries do you need to set to protect this time?

Write out your routine and try it for a week. Then adjust based on what works and what doesn't.

The Importance of Saying No

Want to learn something really important? It's called setting boundaries, and it's actually pretty cool. A boundary is like a fence that protects your time, energy, and wellbeing. For autistic people, boundaries are especially important because you have limited energy and need to use it wisely.

Saying "no" doesn't make you mean—it makes you smart. Even superheroes take breaks!

Things you might need to say no to:

- Social events when you're already drained

- Activities that consistently overwhelm you
- Demands on your time when you need to recharge
- Situations that require intense masking
- Last-minute changes to plans
- Doing things just because "everyone else is doing it"

How to say no kindly but firmly:

- "Thanks for inviting me, but I need some quiet time today."
- "I appreciate you thinking of me, but I can't commit to that right now."
- "That sounds fun, but I'm already feeling overwhelmed this week."
- "I need to check my energy levels and get back to you."
- "I'd love to, but I have something else I need to do." (That something else can be resting!)

Remember: Saying no to something that drains you means saying yes to taking care of yourself. That's not selfish—it's necessary.

Sleep: The Foundation of Self-Care

Sleep is when your brain and body do their most important recharging. For autistic people, getting enough quality sleep is crucial but often challenging.

Common sleep challenges for autistic people:

- Trouble "turning off" your brain

- Sensory issues (uncomfortable pajamas, sheets, room temperature)
- Anxiety about the next day
- Irregular sleep schedules
- Difficulty with the transition from awake to asleep
- Sensitivity to light or sound

Strategies for better sleep:

Create a sleep-friendly environment:

- Dark room (blackout curtains or eye mask)
- Cool temperature
- Comfortable bedding and pajamas
- White noise or silence (whatever you prefer)
- Remove screens and bright lights

Develop a bedtime routine:

- Same bedtime every night (even weekends when possible)
- 30-60 minute wind-down routine
- Calming activities (reading, gentle stretching, quiet music)
- No screens for at least 30 minutes before bed
- Dim lights in the evening

Calm your mind:

- Write down worries or tomorrow's to-do list before bed
- Practice breathing exercises

- Think about your special interest in a calm way
- Listen to guided relaxation or sleep stories
- Use visualization (imagine a peaceful place)

Nutrition and Hydration: Fuel for Your Body and Brain

What you eat and drink affects your energy, mood, and ability to handle stress. For autistic people with sensory sensitivities, food can be complicated, but there are strategies that help.

Basic nutrition principles:

- Eat regularly (don't skip meals, even if you don't feel hungry)
- Include protein, which helps stabilize energy
- Stay hydrated (keep water with you)
- Have safe foods available when you're overwhelmed
- Don't force yourself to eat foods with textures you can't handle

If you're a selective eater:

Many autistic people have a limited range of foods they can eat due to sensory sensitivities. This is okay! Work with what you can eat:

- Make sure your safe foods include some protein and nutrients
- Consider smoothies if textures are hard (you can hide nutritious ingredients)
- Take a multivitamin if your diet is very limited

- Don't let people shame you for your food preferences
- Gradually try new foods when you're ready, without pressure

Hydration matters:

Many autistic people forget to drink water because they don't notice thirst signals (remember interoception from Chapter 2?). Set reminders or keep a water bottle with you as a visual cue.

Movement and Exercise: Finding What Works for You

Physical activity is important for everyone, but for autistic people, it can also help with:

- Sensory regulation
- Emotional management
- Sleep quality
- Energy levels
- Overall wellbeing

The key is finding movement you actually enjoy, not forcing yourself to do exercise you hate.

Movement options to explore:

For sensory seekers:

- Trampoline
- Swimming

- Dancing
- Martial arts
- Rock climbing
- Running

For those who prefer calm, predictable movement:

- Walking
- Yoga
- Stretching
- Bike riding
- Skating

For those who prefer solo activities:

- Home workout videos
- Walking or running alone
- Individual sports

For those who like routine:

- Scheduled classes
- Same route/routine each time
- Structured sports

You don't need to do intense exercise—even 15-20 minutes of movement you enjoy can make a difference.

Quick Challenge: Your Weekly Self-Care Plan

Create a simple weekly plan that includes:

Daily:

- Reset routine (when and what)
- Sleep schedule
- Meals and hydration

Weekly:

- Longer recharge time (weekend activity)
- Physical movement
- Time for special interest
- Social time (if desired)
- Alone time

As Needed:

- Sensory breaks
- Emotional regulation strategies
- Boundary setting

Recognizing Burnout and Recovering

Even with good self-care, sometimes autistic people experience burnout—a state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion that comes from prolonged stress and energy depletion.

Signs of autistic burnout:

- Increased sensory sensitivities
- Loss of skills you normally have (trouble with tasks that are usually easy)
- Extreme fatigue that doesn't improve with rest
- Increased meltdowns or shutdowns
- Loss of interest in special interests
- Difficulty with basic self-care
- Feeling disconnected or numb
- Increased need to mask or decreased ability to mask

If you're experiencing burnout:

1. **Reduce demands**: Cut out everything non-essential
2. **Increase rest**: Sleep more, do less
3. **Minimize sensory input**: Create a calm, comfortable environment
4. **Drop the mask**: Stop trying to appear non-autistic
5. **Engage with special interests**: If you can, let yourself dive deep into what you love
6. **Ask for help**: Tell trusted adults you're struggling
7. **Be patient**: Recovery takes time—sometimes weeks or months

Preventing burnout:

- Regular reset routines
- Consistent boundaries
- Adequate sleep
- Minimal masking
- Regular engagement with special interests
- Sensory-friendly environments
- Support system

Self-Care Is Not Selfish

Sometimes people might tell you that taking care of yourself is selfish or that you're being "too sensitive" about your needs. This is not true. Self-care is essential, not optional, especially for autistic people.

You can't pour from an empty cup. Taking care of yourself means you have energy and capacity to do the things you want to do and be there for people you care about. Ignoring your needs doesn't make you stronger—it leads to burnout, meltdowns, and feeling miserable.

Remember:

- Your needs are valid
- Rest is productive
- Boundaries are healthy

- Recharge time is necessary
- You deserve to feel good

Your Self-Care Journey

Self-care isn't something you do perfectly—it's an ongoing practice of learning what you need and trying to meet those needs. Some days you'll do great. Some days you'll struggle. That's normal and okay.

The goal isn't to never feel drained or overwhelmed. The goal is to:

- Understand what drains and recharges you
- Have strategies and routines that help
- Recognize when you need extra support
- Be kind to yourself in the process

Keep experimenting, keep learning about yourself, and keep prioritizing your wellbeing. You're worth the effort, and taking care of yourself is one of the most important things you'll ever do.

Chapter Five

Special Interests

Your Superpowers and Passions

Have you ever gotten so excited about something that you could talk about it for hours? Maybe you know everything there is to know about horses, or you've memorized all the dialogue from your favorite movie, or you can identify every species of butterfly in your area. That's what we call a special interest, and guess what? It's one of your superpowers.

Special interests are like having a supercharged brain connection to something you love. While other kids might enjoy lots of different things a little bit, you might love one or two things A LOT. And that's actually pretty amazing. Your special interest isn't just a hobby—it's a bridge that can lead you to incredible knowledge, new friendships, and opportunities you haven't even imagined yet.

Some people might not understand why you want to read the same book about ancient Egypt fifteen times, or why you need to organize your rock collection by mineral hardness every weekend. They might say things like "Don't you want to try something new?" or "You're obsessed!" But here's the truth: your deep passion for your special interest is a strength, not something that needs to be fixed[30]. When you love something this much, you can become a real expert—the person everyone goes to when they have questions.

Meet Liana: Her "Stellar Schedule"

Let me introduce you to Liana. She's eleven years old, and if you ask her anything about space, stars, or planets, buckle up—because she knows A LOT.

Liana discovered astronomy when she was eight years old. Her dad took her camping, and she saw the Milky Way for the first time—thousands of stars stretching across the sky like someone had spilled glitter across black velvet. From that moment, she was hooked.

By age nine, Liana could identify all the major constellations visible from her backyard. By ten, she'd read every astronomy book in her school library (some of them three times). She knew the names of Jupiter's moons, could explain why Mars looks red, and had strong opinions about whether Pluto should still be considered a planet. (She thinks it should, by the way, and she has a very detailed argument prepared if you want to debate it.)

But Liana faced a challenge that many autistic girls with special interests face: balancing her passion with everything else in her life. She'd stay up way too late reading about black holes, then be exhausted at school the next day. She'd spend all weekend organizing her astronomy notes and forget about her homework. Her mom worried that Liana wasn't making time for friends or other activities.

"I don't WANT other activities," Liana told her mom. "I want to learn about space."

Her mom understood that astronomy wasn't just a phase—it was a genuine passion that made Liana feel alive and excited. But she also knew Liana needed to find a way to make her special interest work WITH her life, not against it.

That's when Liana created what she called her "Stellar Schedule."

Using Your Special Interests: From Passion to Expert Knowledge

Here's something cool about special interests: they can teach you skills that go way beyond the topic itself. When Liana organized her astronomy knowledge, she was also learning how to manage information, set goals, and structure her time. These are skills that help with everything from school projects to future careers[31].

Liana's Stellar Schedule helped her make the most of her passion while still taking care of other important stuff. Here's how she did it:

Monday through Thursday: Liana gave herself 45 minutes of "astronomy time" after finishing her homework. She could read, watch documentaries, update her observation journal, or work on her star charts. Knowing she had this dedicated time actually helped her focus better on homework, because she wasn't constantly thinking "I wish I could be learning about space right now."

Friday nights: This was Liana's "deep dive" night. She could stay up an extra hour (with her parents' permission) to really get into whatever astronomy topic fascinated her that week. One Friday she spent three hours creating a scale model of the solar system using different-sized balls and a really long hallway. Her little brother kept running through it, but she didn't even mind—she was having too much fun.

Weekends: Liana balanced astronomy with other activities. Saturday mornings were for stargazing if the weather was clear (or sleeping in if she'd been up late Friday). Saturday afternoons she'd hang out with her friend Maya, who wasn't into astronomy but loved hearing Liana's enthusiasm. Sunday was family time, homework catch-up, and preparing for the week ahead.

Special occasions: Liana marked meteor showers, eclipses, and other astronomical events on her calendar months in advance. These were her "astronomy holidays," and her family learned to plan around them.

The Stellar Schedule wasn't about limiting Liana's passion—it was about making sure her passion had space to grow without taking over everything else. And you know what? It worked. Liana was less tired, her grades improved, and she actually enjoyed her astronomy time more because she wasn't stressed about all the other stuff she was ignoring.

Try This! Create your own schedule for your special interest.

You don't have to call it a "Stellar Schedule" (unless you want to—that name is pretty cool). Here's how:

1. **Write down your special interest at the top of a page.** Draw stars around it, use your favorite colors, make it look awesome.

2. **List your weekly responsibilities.** School, homework, chores, family time, sleep—all the stuff that needs to happen.

3. **Find your dedicated interest time.** When can you dive into your passion? Maybe it's 30 minutes after school, or weekend mornings, or before bed. Pick times that work with your energy levels. (If you're tired after school, maybe that's not the best time for deep research.)

4. **Plan one "deep dive" session per week.** This is your time to really get into your interest without watching the clock. Maybe it's Friday night, Sunday afternoon, or whenever works for your family.

5. **Mark special events.** If your interest has special days (like meteor showers for astronomy, or horse shows if you love horses, or new movie releases if you're into animation), put them on your calendar so you can look forward to them.

Remember: your schedule should feel good, not like a punishment. If it's not working, change it! Liana adjusted her Stellar Schedule at least five times before she found what worked best.

Other Ways to Organize Your Special Interest

Your friends might not get why you can talk about marine biology for three hours straight, and that's okay. They probably can't explain why they care about the latest pop star either! But organizing your knowledge can help you share it in ways that don't make people's eyes glaze over. (You know the look—the "I'm trapped" eyes instead of the "tell me more!" eyes.)

Here are some ways other autistic girls organize their special interests:

- **The Collection Method:** If your interest involves collecting things (rocks, books, figurines, pressed flowers), organize them in a way that makes sense to you. By color, by date acquired, by size, by how much you love them—whatever works!

- **The Expert Journal:** Keep a notebook where you write down everything you learn. Liana has seven astronomy journals filled with notes, drawings, and observations. When she wants to remember something, she knows exactly where to look.

- **The Teaching File:** Create presentations, videos, or posters about your interest. Even if you never show them to anyone, making them helps you organize your thoughts. Plus, you'll have them ready if someone actually wants to learn!

- **The Connection Map:** Draw a big web showing how different parts of your interest connect. Liana has one showing how stars, planets, galaxies, and black holes all relate to each other. It looks like a beautiful, complicated spider web of knowledge.

The goal isn't to make your interest more "acceptable" to other people. The goal is to help YOU enjoy it even more and maybe, just maybe, find ways to share it with people who are genuinely interested[32].

Building Connections Through Shared Interests: Finding Your Community

For a long time, Liana thought astronomy was something she'd always do alone. Sure, her family supported her, and her friend Maya listened to her talk about space (even though Maya was way more interested in art). But Liana had never met another kid who loved astronomy as much as she did.

Then her mom found out about the Junior Astronomers program at the local observatory.

"It's every other Saturday," her mom said. "Kids your age who are interested in space. They do observations, learn from real astronomers, and work on projects together."

Liana's first reaction was excitement. Other kids who loved space! But then anxiety crept in. What if they knew more than her? What if they thought her questions were stupid? What if she said something weird and they laughed?

"What if it's amazing?" her mom asked gently.

Liana decided to try one session.

The first Junior Astronomers meeting was... awkward. Liana walked into a room with eight other kids, and everyone seemed to already know each other. She sat in the back and didn't say much. But then Dr. Chen, the astronomer leading the program, started talking about exoplanets—planets outside our solar system—and Liana forgot to be nervous.

"Did you know," Liana said, raising her hand, "that some exoplanets might have two suns, like Tatooine in Star Wars? They're called circumbinary planets."

Dr. Chen's face lit up. "Yes! Have you heard about Kepler-16b?"

And just like that, Liana was talking. Really talking. About planets and stars and the possibility of life on other worlds. A boy named Marcus jumped in with questions about habitable zones. A girl named Priya shared a documentary she'd watched about the James Webb Space Telescope.

For the first time in her life, Liana was in a room full of people who got it. Who understood why this stuff mattered. Who didn't think she was weird for knowing the orbital period of Neptune.

Over the next few months, Junior Astronomers became Liana's favorite thing. She and Marcus started a friendly competition to see who could identify more deep-sky objects through the observatory's telescope. Priya taught her how to use special software to process images of galaxies. Dr. Chen noticed Liana's detailed observation journals and

asked if she'd be interested in helping teach younger kids during the observatory's public nights.

"Me? Teach?" Liana was surprised.

"You have expert knowledge and genuine passion," Dr. Chen said. "That's exactly what makes a great teacher."

So Liana started volunteering at family astronomy nights. She'd set up a telescope, help kids find the Moon or Jupiter, and explain what they were seeing. At first, she talked too fast and used words that were too complicated. But she learned to slow down, ask questions, and watch for those "tell me more!" eyes instead of the "I'm lost" eyes.

One night, a little girl looked through the telescope at Saturn and gasped. "The rings are REAL?" she whispered.

"Totally real," Liana said, grinning. "Made of billions of chunks of ice and rock. Want to know something cool about them?"

The little girl nodded eagerly, and Liana launched into an explanation about how the rings might be younger than the dinosaurs. When the girl's mom finally pulled her away, she was still asking questions.

"You're really good at this," Marcus told Liana later.

Liana felt proud. Her special interest—the thing some people thought was "too much"—was actually helping other people discover the wonder of space. That felt pretty amazing.

Finding People Who Share Your Special Interest

One of the best things about special interests is that they can help you find your community—people who share your passion and get why it matters to you[33]. But finding that community isn't always easy, especially if your interest is unusual or if you live in a small town.

Here are some ways to connect with people who share your special interest:

Look for local clubs or groups. Libraries, community centers, museums, and schools sometimes have clubs related to different interests. If there's not one for your specific interest, there might be something close. (Liana's observatory also had a geology club that Dallas from Chapter 1 would have loved!)

Check online communities. With your parents' permission and supervision, you can find forums, Discord servers, or social media groups dedicated to almost any interest. Just remember to stay safe online—never share personal information, and tell a trusted adult if anyone makes you uncomfortable.

Start your own group. If you can't find a community, create one! Put up a flyer at school or the library. You might be surprised how many other kids are interested in the same thing. Even if only one or two people show up, that's still a community.

Connect through learning. Take a class, join a workshop, or attend events related to your interest. You'll automatically be around people who care about the same things.

Be open to different levels of interest. Not everyone in your community needs to be as passionate as you are. Some people might be casual fans while you're a super-expert, and that's okay. Liana learned that teaching beginners was just as fun as talking with other experts.

Your Mission:

Think about your special interest and answer these questions:

1. **Who else might be interested in this?** Kids your age? Adults? People in your community? Online communities?

2. **Where could you find them?** Make a list of three places (real or online) where people interested in your topic might gather.

3. **What would you want to do together?** Talk about your interest? Work on projects? Teach each other new things? Just hang out with people who get it?

4. **What's one small step you could take this week?** Maybe it's asking a parent to help you search for a local club, or looking up online communities, or men-

tioning your interest to a teacher who might know other interested kids.

You don't have to find your community right away. Liana didn't join Junior Astronomers until she was eleven. But knowing that communities exist—that there are other people out there who love what you love—can make you feel less alone.

When Your Interest Connects to Your Future

Here's something nobody tells you when you're deep into a special interest: it might actually lead somewhere amazing. Not every special interest becomes a career (and that's totally fine!), but the skills you develop and the knowledge you gain can open doors you didn't even know existed[34].

Liana doesn't know yet if she'll become an astronomer when she grows up. Maybe she will. Maybe she'll be an aerospace engineer, or a science teacher, or a science writer, or something completely different. But her astronomy passion has already taught her:

- **How to research and learn independently** (useful for literally any career)
- **How to organize complex information** (helpful in school and beyond)
- **How to teach and explain difficult concepts** (great for any job involving people)
- **How to pursue a goal over time** (essential life skill)
- **How to find and connect with communities** (important for making friends and networking)

Plus, she's had experiences most kids her age haven't had—like using a real research telescope, meeting professional astronomers, and teaching dozens of people about the universe.

Your special interest is giving you gifts right now, even if you can't see them all yet. Every hour you spend learning about horses is teaching you about biology, responsibility, and dedication. Every story you write is developing your creativity, language skills, and emotional understanding. Every video game you master is building your problem-solving abilities and strategic thinking.

So don't let anyone tell you that your special interest is "just a phase" or "a waste of time." It's not. It's you, learning and growing in your own cool way.

Quick Challenge:

Make a list of five skills you've learned from your special interest. They don't have to be directly related to the topic. For example:

- **From collecting rocks:** patience, organization, research skills, attention to detail, scientific observation
- **From reading fantasy novels:** vocabulary, imagination, understanding story structure, empathy for characters, critical thinking
- **From learning about trains:** memorization, historical knowledge, geography, engineering concepts, dedication to a long-term interest

See? Your special interest is teaching you way more than you might realize. When you become the expert on something, people will start asking you questions like you're a walking Wikipedia. Pretty cool, right?

Your Special Interest, Your Way

As we wrap up this chapter, I want you to remember something important: your special interest doesn't have to look like anyone else's.

Some autistic girls have one intense special interest that lasts for years. Others have several interests that rotate. Some interests are common (like animals or art), while others are more unusual (like vacuum cleaners or weather patterns). Some girls want to share their interests with everyone, while others prefer to enjoy them privately. All of these are completely valid ways to have a special interest.

Liana's astronomy journey taught her that her passion was a strength, not something to hide or apologize for. It taught her how to balance something she loved with other parts of her life. And it taught her that sharing her interest—when she found the right people—could create connections and opportunities she never expected.

Your special interest is part of what makes you uniquely you. It's a source of joy, knowledge, and pride. Whether you're just discovering a new passion or you've been devoted to the same interest for years, know that it's valuable. It matters. And it's helping you become the amazing person you're meant to be.

So keep learning. Keep exploring. Keep being passionate about what you love. The world needs people who care deeply about things—people like you.

Let's Explore:

Before we move on to the next chapter, take a moment to celebrate your special interest:

1. **Write down or draw your special interest.** Make it colorful, detailed, and awesome.

2. **List three things you love most about it.** What makes it so fascinating to you?

3. **Identify one way your special interest has helped you.** Maybe it's helped you make a friend, learn something new, feel calm when you're stressed, or just brought you joy.

4. **Set one goal related to your interest.** It could be learning something new, organizing your collection, finding a community, or sharing your knowledge with someone.

Your special interest is your superpower. Now let's learn how to use all your superpowers together as we move forward on this journey.

In the next chapter, we'll explore friendships and social connections—including how your special interests can actually help you make friends, and how to navigate the sometimes-confusing world of tween social life.

Chapter Six

Authentic Friendships

Connecting on Your Terms

So you've learned the basics of social navigation—how to start conversations, read social cues, and use scripts when you need them. That's huge! But here's the thing: knowing how to talk to people and actually building meaningful friendships are two different things.

Think about it this way: learning conversation skills is like learning the rules of a game. It helps you play, and that's important. But real friendship? That's not about following rules. That's about finding people who make you feel comfortable, understood, and genuinely happy. It's about connections where you don't have to work quite so hard to translate yourself. It's about relationships that give you energy instead of just draining it.

This chapter is different from the last one. We're not focusing on how to navigate social situations that feel awkward or confusing. Instead, we're talking about how to build and maintain friendships that actually feel *good*—friendships where you can be authentically yourself. We're going to explore how to find people who share your interests and values, how to manage your social energy so friendships don't become exhausting, and how to maintain connections over time without burning out.

Because here's what a lot of people don't tell you: friendship doesn't have to look the way it does in movies or TV shows. You don't have to have a huge group of friends. You don't have to hang out every single day. You don't have to love parties or sleepovers or constant texting. Authentic friendship means finding what works for *you*—and finding people who respect and appreciate your way of connecting.

Meet Piper. She's twelve, loves creating digital art, and used to think she was "bad at friendship" because she didn't want to hang out with big groups or go to loud events. Then she met Maya, another artist who preferred quiet hangouts and deep conversations about their creative projects. Their friendship looked different from what Piper saw other kids doing—but it felt right. Throughout this chapter, you'll see how Piper and others like her learned to build friendships on their own terms.

Maybe you've already made a friend or two, but you're not sure how to keep those friendships going. Maybe you want friends but haven't found your people yet. Maybe you have friends but you're exhausted from trying to keep up with their social expectations. Wherever you are in your friendship journey, this chapter has practical tools to help you build the kinds of connections that feel authentic, sustainable, and genuinely fulfilling.

Ready? Let's talk about finding your people.

Finding Your People

Piper discovered something amazing in sixth grade. She'd been trying to fit in with the "popular" group at lunch, but it always left her exhausted and confused. One day, she noticed two girls drawing in sketchbooks during free period. Piper loved art too, especially drawing detailed fantasy creatures.

"Can I see what you're drawing?" Piper asked Maya, who was sketching an elaborate dragon.

Maya's face lit up. "Do you like dragons? I'm designing a whole series based on different elements—fire, water, earth, air."

For the next hour, Piper and Maya talked about art techniques, favorite fantasy books, and their dream art projects. Piper didn't have to pretend to be interested in things she didn't care about. She didn't have to force herself to make eye contact or remember to smile at the "right" times. Maya just got it.

That's what authentic friendship feels like. It's when you can be yourself without constantly worrying about doing or saying the "wrong" thing.

Signs you've found your people:

- You can talk about your special interests without feeling judged
- They understand when you need breaks or quiet time
- You don't feel exhausted pretending to be someone else
- They appreciate your unique way of seeing the world
- Disagreements feel safe, not scary

Understanding Social Energy

Riley learned about social energy the hard way. Her mom kept encouraging her to hang out with friends more often, and Riley wanted to make her happy. So when her friend invited her to the mall on Saturday, Riley said yes. Then another friend invited her to a birthday party on Sunday. Riley said yes to that too.

By Sunday afternoon, Riley felt like her brain was full of static. Everything was too loud, too bright, too much. She snapped at her little brother over nothing. She couldn't focus on anything. She felt awful.

"I think I overdid it," Riley told her mom that evening.

Her mom helped her understand something important: social time uses energy, even when you're having fun. It's like your phone battery—it drains when you use it, and it needs time to recharge.

Riley started thinking of her social energy like a battery with five bars:

- **Five bars (fully charged):** Ready for social activities, can handle busy environments
- **Four bars:** Good for hanging out with close friends in calm settings
- **Three bars:** Okay for short, structured activities (like a club meeting)
- **Two bars:** Need mostly quiet time, maybe one trusted person
- **One bar:** Need to be alone to recharge

Now Riley checks her battery before saying yes to plans. If she's at two bars and someone invites her to a loud, crowded event, she knows she needs to recharge first or suggest a quieter alternative.

Try This! Create your own social battery tracker.

Draw five battery bars in your journal or on your phone. Check in with yourself throughout the day. What activities drain your battery fastest? What helps you recharge?

Different Types of Friendships

Not all friendships look the same, and that's actually pretty cool. You might have:

Interest-based friends: People you connect with around a shared passion. Morgan and Emma both love creating miniature art. They spend hours together building tiny furniture and painting small details. They don't talk much about personal stuff, and that's fine—their friendship is built around their shared creative interest.

Comfort friends: People you feel completely relaxed around. You can be quiet together without it feeling awkward. You can stim freely. You can say "I need a break" without explaining yourself.

Activity friends: Friends you enjoy doing specific things with—playing a certain game, doing a sport, working on projects. You might not hang out outside of that activity, and that's okay.

Deep-talk friends: People you can have long, meaningful conversations with about topics that matter to you.

You don't need to have all types of friendships, and one friend might fit into multiple categories. The important thing is that your friendships feel good to you.

Navigating Friendship Challenges

Even great friendships hit bumps sometimes. Here are some common challenges and how to handle them:

Challenge: **Your friend wants to hang out more than you have energy for**

What to try: *"I really like spending time with you, but I need more downtime than some people. Can we plan to hang out once a week instead of every day? That way I'll have more energy and we can really enjoy our time together."*

Challenge: **You accidentally hurt someone's feelings**

What to try: *"I didn't realize that bothered you. I'm sorry. Can you help me understand what upset you? I want to make sure I don't do it again."*

Challenge: **Someone is treating you in a way that doesn't feel right**

What to try: *"When you [specific action], I feel [emotion]. I need [what would help]."* If they don't respect your boundaries after you've clearly stated them, it might be time to reconsider the friendship.

Challenge: **You're not sure if someone wants to be your friend**

What to try: Start small. Invite them to do something specific and time-limited. *"Want to work on the science project together after school?"* is less pressure than *"Want to be best friends forever?"*

The Art of Being a Good Friend

Friendship isn't just about finding people who understand you—it's also about being someone who understands others. Here's what that looks like:

Show interest in their interests: Even if you don't share their passion for soccer or K-pop, you can ask questions and listen when they talk about it. They do the same for you with your interests.

Respect their boundaries too: Just like you need people to respect your sensory needs and social energy limits, your friends have their own needs and limits.

Be honest: If you can't read social cues well, it's okay to ask directly. "Are you upset with me?" or "Do you actually want to do this, or are you just being polite?" Real friends appreciate honesty.

Apologize when you mess up: Everyone makes mistakes. A simple, genuine "I'm sorry" goes a long way.

Celebrate their wins: When good things happen to your friends, be happy for them. Share their excitement.

When Friendships Change or End

Sometimes friendships change, and that can feel really hard. Maybe you and your friend develop different interests. Maybe one of you moves away. Maybe you realize someone isn't treating you well and you need to step back.

It's okay to feel sad when friendships change. It's also okay to outgrow friendships or to decide a friendship isn't healthy for you.

Jade had been friends with someone since kindergarten, but by fifth grade, things felt different. Her friend started making fun of Jade's special interest in marine biology, calling

it "weird" and "babyish." Jade tried to explain how hurtful that was, but her friend didn't stop.

With help from her school counselor, Jade realized this friendship wasn't making her feel good anymore. She started spending less time with that friend and more time with people who appreciated her interests. It was sad at first, but eventually Jade felt relieved.

You deserve friendships that make you feel valued, respected, and comfortable being yourself.

Your Mission: Friendship Reflection

Think about your current friendships. In your journal, consider:

- Which friendships make you feel energized (or at least not drained)?
- Which friendships let you be completely yourself?
- Are there any friendships that consistently make you feel bad about yourself?
- What qualities matter most to you in a friend?
- What kind of friend do you want to be?

Remember, quality matters more than quantity. Having two genuine friends who really get you is better than having twenty friends you have to pretend around.

Authentic friendships are out there. They might take time to find, and they might look different from what you see in movies or on social media. But when you find people who appreciate the real you—your interests, your way of communicating, your need for downtime, all of it—those friendships are absolutely worth it.

Chapter Seven

Speaking Up for Yourself

Finding Your Voice

Learning to speak up for yourself (also called self-advocacy) is one of the most important skills you'll develop during your tween years. It means asking for what you need, setting boundaries, and making sure people understand you—even when it feels scary or uncomfortable.

Here's something cool: you have rights. Yes, actually have rights at school, at home, and in the world. Not just the right to complain about cafeteria food! Real rights that protect you and help you get what you need to succeed.

Understanding Your Rights

Let's start with the basics. As an autistic person, you have the right to:

Be yourself: You don't have to hide your stims, pretend to make eye contact, or force yourself to act "normal." Your way of being is valid.

Ask for accommodations: If you need noise-canceling headphones, extra time on tests, a quiet space to eat lunch, or other supports, you can ask for them. Schools are required to provide reasonable accommodations.

Say no: To hugs you don't want, to activities that overwhelm you, to anything that makes you uncomfortable. "No" is a complete sentence.

Have your communication style respected: Whether you speak, use AAC, type to communicate, or mix different methods, your communication is valid.

Make mistakes and learn: You don't have to be perfect. Everyone is still learning and growing.

Knowing your rights is the first step. Using your voice to stand up for those rights is the next step.

Starting Small: Practice Makes Progress

Olivia used to stay quiet when things bothered her at school. When the fluorescent lights gave her headaches, she just dealt with it. When group projects made her anxious, she pushed through. When classmates interrupted her, she let it go.

Then in history class, her teacher assigned a big group presentation. Olivia knew from experience that she worked better alone or with just one partner. Group projects with four or five people meant too many voices, too much chaos, and too little control over the final product.

For the first time, Olivia decided to speak up.

"Can I talk to you about the project?" she asked her teacher after class, her heart pounding.

"Of course, Olivia."

"I work better with smaller groups. Could I do the project with just one partner instead of a big group?"

Her teacher thought for a moment. *"That makes sense. Yes, you can work with one partner."*

That's it. Olivia didn't have to explain her entire life story or justify why she needed this. She stated what she needed clearly and calmly, and her teacher said yes.

Speaking up doesn't always mean big, dramatic moments. Usually, it's small, specific requests that make your daily life better.

Let's Explore: Think of one small thing that would make your day easier. Maybe it's sitting near the door in class so you can step out if you need a break. Maybe it's having written instructions instead of just verbal ones. Pick something small to practice asking for this week.

The Self-Advocacy Formula

When you need to speak up for yourself, this simple formula can help:

1. State the situation: "When [specific thing happens]..."

2. Explain the impact: "I feel/experience [specific effect]..."

3. Make a clear request: "Could we [specific solution]?"

Here's how it works in real situations:

Example 1: *"When we have fire drills without warning, I get really overwhelmed by the loud alarm. Could you let me know in advance when drills are scheduled so I can prepare?"*

Example 2: *"When I have to present in front of the whole class, I get so anxious that I can't focus on the content. Could I present to just you or record my presentation instead?"*

Example 3: *"When people touch my shoulder to get my attention, it's really startling for me. Could you say my name instead?"*

Notice how each example is specific and includes a clear solution? That makes it easier for people to help you.

Who to Talk To (And When)

Different situations call for talking to different people. Here's a quick guide:

Talk to your teacher when:

- You need classroom accommodations
- You're struggling with an assignment
- Something in class is overwhelming you
- You need clarification on expectations

Talk to your parents/guardians when:

- You need support at school
- You're struggling with something at home
- You need help talking to other adults
- You want to explore new accommodations

Talk to the school counselor when:

- You're having friendship troubles
- You're feeling overwhelmed or anxious
- You need help problem-solving
- You want to learn more coping strategies

Talk to your doctor when:

- You have questions about your autism
- You're experiencing new challenges

- You need medical documentation for accommodations
- You want to explore therapy or other supports

You don't have to figure everything out alone. Part of speaking up for yourself is knowing when to ask for help.

Handling Pushback

Sometimes when you speak up, people don't immediately say yes. They might not understand, or they might need more information. This doesn't mean you did something wrong.

If someone says no or seems confused, try:

Ask questions: *"Can you help me understand why that won't work?"* Sometimes there's a reason you didn't know about, and you can problem-solve together.

Offer alternatives: *"If that solution won't work, what about [different idea]?"* Show you're flexible and willing to find a solution that works for everyone.

Get support: *"Can my parent/counselor/advocate join this conversation?"* Sometimes having another person there helps.

Know your rights: If you're asking for something you're legally entitled to (like reasonable accommodations at school), you can remind people of that. *"I understand this might be different from usual, but I have the right to accommodations under Section 504."*

Stay calm: This is hard, but getting upset usually makes things harder. Take deep breaths. It's okay to say, *"Can I think about this and come back to talk more later?"*

Writing It Down

Some people find it easier to write things down instead of speaking out loud. That's totally valid! You can:

- Email your teacher instead of talking in person

- Write a note to your parents
- Type out what you want to say and read it during a meeting
- Use a communication app or AAC device
- Text instead of calling

Written communication gives you time to think about exactly what you want to say. It also creates a record of your request, which can be helpful.

Your Detective Work: Self-Advocacy Scenarios

Read each scenario and think about how you might handle it:

Scenario 1: Your friend keeps borrowing your art supplies without asking, and it bothers you because you like your things organized in a specific way.

Scenario 2: Your teacher assigns seats, and you're placed right under a buzzing fluorescent light that gives you headaches.

Scenario 3: Your family is planning a vacation to a theme park, but you know from experience that crowds and loud noises overwhelm you quickly.

Scenario 4: A classmate keeps trying to hug you hello every morning, even though you've said you don't like hugs.

For each scenario, think about:

- Who would you talk to?
- What would you say using the self-advocacy formula?
- What solution would you suggest?

There's no single "right" answer to these scenarios. The point is to practice thinking through how you'd handle them.

Building Your Confidence

Speaking up for yourself gets easier with practice, but it might never feel completely comfortable—and that's okay. Even adults who are great at self-advocacy sometimes feel nervous about it.

What helps:

- **Start small:** Practice with low-stakes situations first
- **Celebrate wins:** Every time you speak up, even if it doesn't go perfectly, you're building a skill
- **Learn from experience:** If something doesn't work, think about what you might try differently next time
- **Find your people:** Connect with other autistic tweens and teens who understand
- **Be patient with yourself:** This is a skill you'll keep developing for years

Remember Olivia from the beginning of this chapter? After successfully asking for a smaller group in history class, she felt more confident. A few weeks later, she asked if she could take tests in the quiet room instead of the noisy classroom. Then she asked her parents if they could give her advance notice before family gatherings so she could prepare mentally.

Each time she spoke up, it got a little bit easier.

Your Turn!

This week, practice speaking up for yourself at least once. It can be something small:

- Ask for what you want for dinner
- Tell someone you need a break
- Request a change to make something more comfortable
- Say no to something you don't want to do

Write down what happened. How did it feel? What did you learn? What might you do differently next time?

Your voice matters. Your needs are valid. And the more you practice using your voice, the stronger it becomes.

Chapter Eight

Navigating School Life

Learning Your Way

School can feel like it was designed for everyone except autistic kids. The fluorescent lights, the crowded hallways, the constant social navigation, the expectation that everyone learns the same way—it's a lot. But here's the good news: once you understand how you learn best and what supports you need, school gets more manageable.

Your brain didn't come with an instruction manual, but we're about to write one together.

Understanding Your Learning Style

Lex is twelve and passionate about robotics. She spends hours building robots, programming them, and troubleshooting when things don't work. She can visualize exactly how gears and circuits fit together. She creates detailed diagrams of her designs and loves hands-on engineering challenges.

But in school, Lex struggled. Her teachers mostly lectured while students took notes. They'd explain concepts verbally and expect everyone to understand. For Lex, this was like trying to build a robot by only reading about it—possible, but way harder than necessary.

Everything changed when Lex's science teacher introduced a unit on simple machines. Instead of just lecturing, the teacher brought in actual pulleys, levers, and gears. Students could touch them, experiment with them, and build their own simple machines.

Lex thrived. She built an elaborate pulley system and created detailed diagrams showing how each component worked. For the first time all year, she felt like school made sense.

That's because Lex is a hands-on, visual learner. She needs to see things, touch things, and build things to really understand them.

The Three Main Learning Styles

Most people learn best through one or two of these approaches:

Visual learners understand information best when they can see it:

- Diagrams, charts, and graphs make sense
- Color-coding helps organize information
- Watching demonstrations works better than just hearing instructions
- Drawing or mapping out concepts helps them remember
- Written instructions are clearer than verbal ones

Auditory learners understand information best when they can hear it:

- Listening to explanations helps concepts click
- Talking through problems out loud helps them think
- Verbal instructions work well
- Recording lectures to listen to again is helpful
- Discussion and conversation aid understanding

Kinesthetic learners understand information best when they can move and do:

- Hands-on activities make concepts clear
- Building models or doing experiments helps them learn
- Moving while studying (pacing, fidgeting) helps them focus
- Taking breaks to move around improves concentration
- Physically acting out concepts aids memory

Many autistic people are strong visual learners, but not everyone. You might be a combination of styles, or you might find that different subjects work better with different approaches.

Quick Challenge: Think about a time you learned something really well. How did you learn it? Did you watch videos? Read about it? Try it yourself? That's a clue to your learning style.

Lex's Robot Parts Collection

Remember how Lex loves robotics? She started keeping a "robot parts collection" in her locker—not actual robot parts, but learning tools that help her brain work better at school:

- **Visual aids:** Graph paper for math problems, colored pens for color-coding notes, a small whiteboard for drawing out concepts
- **Fidget tools:** A small gear she can spin while listening, a fidget cube for her pocket
- **Sensory supports:** Noise-reducing earplugs for loud assemblies, a smooth stone to hold during tests
- **Organization tools:** A checklist system for tracking assignments, folders col-

or-coded by subject

- **Break cards:** Permission to step out of class when overwhelmed

These aren't crutches or cheating—they're tools that help Lex's brain work at its best. Just like glasses help people see clearly, these tools help Lex learn effectively.

Sophie's Organization System

Sophie, who you met in Chapter 4, struggled with keeping track of assignments and materials. Papers disappeared into her backpack's black hole. She'd forget about projects until the night before they were due. Her desk at home was covered in random papers and supplies.

Then Sophie discovered a system that worked for her brain:

The Color-Code System:

- Red folder and notebook for math
- Blue for science
- Green for English
- Yellow for social studies
- Purple for electives

The Brain Dump Method:

Every day after school, Sophie spends five minutes writing down everything she needs to do. She doesn't organize it yet—just gets it all out of her head and onto paper. Then she numbers the items by priority.

The Visual Schedule:

Sophie created a large wall calendar with different colored stickers:

- Green sticker = assignment due
- Blue sticker = test or quiz
- Red sticker = project deadline
- Yellow sticker = fun event to look forward to

The Sunday Reset:

Every Sunday evening, Sophie spends 30 minutes organizing her backpack, checking her calendar, and preparing for the week ahead.

This system works for Sophie because it's visual, consistent, and doesn't require her to remember everything in her head. Your system might look completely different, and that's perfect.

Making School Work for You

Here are practical strategies that help many autistic tweens succeed at school:

For sensory challenges:

- Request a seat away from flickering lights or noisy areas
- Use noise-canceling headphones or earplugs during independent work
- Take sensory breaks when needed

- Keep a small sensory kit in your backpack (fidgets, gum, stress ball)
- Wear comfortable clothing, even if it's not the "cool" style

For focus and attention:

- Break large assignments into smaller chunks
- Use timers to create structure (work for 15 minutes, break for 5)
- Minimize visual distractions on your desk
- Try different study locations to find what works
- Move while studying if that helps you focus

For organization:

- Use one system consistently (don't keep switching)
- Set phone reminders for important deadlines
- Take photos of the homework board instead of copying it down
- Keep extra supplies so you're never searching for a pencil
- Use checklists for multi-step assignments

For social navigation:

- Identify a quiet spot where you can eat lunch if the cafeteria is overwhelming
- Find a club or activity based on your interests to meet like-minded people
- It's okay to spend free time alone if that's what you need
- You don't have to attend every social event

For communication with teachers:

- Email is often easier than talking in person
- Be specific about what you need
- Ask questions when you don't understand—that's what teachers are there for
- Request written instructions in addition to verbal ones
- Let teachers know if you need more processing time

When School Feels Impossible

Olivia, who you met in Chapter 7, had a really hard semester in sixth grade. Everything felt overwhelming. She was behind in multiple classes. She couldn't focus. She cried before school most mornings.

With help from her parents and school counselor, Olivia realized she needed more support. They set up a meeting with her teachers and created a 504 plan—a formal document that outlined accommodations Olivia needed to succeed.

Olivia's accommodations included:

- Extended time on tests and assignments
- Permission to take breaks and step out of class when needed
- A quiet space for lunch and study hall
- Reduced homework load (quality over quantity)
- Written instructions for all assignments

Within a few weeks, school felt more manageable. Olivia was still autistic—she still got overwhelmed sometimes—but now she had official support instead of trying to push through alone.

If school feels impossible, that's a sign you need more support, not a sign that something is wrong with you. Talk to your parents, your counselor, or another trusted adult about getting help.

Your Learning Profile

Let's create your personal learning profile. In your journal, answer these questions:

Learning Style:

- Do I understand things better when I see them, hear them, or do them?
- What's the best way I've ever learned something?
- What makes it hard for me to focus or understand?

Sensory Needs:

- What sensory things at school bother me most?
- What sensory tools help me feel calm and focused?
- When do I need sensory breaks?

Organization:

- What organization systems have I tried?
- What works? What doesn't?
- What's my biggest organization challenge?

Support Needs:

- What accommodations would help me most?
- Who can I talk to about getting more support?

- What's one thing I could ask for this week?

Understanding your learning profile is like having a map. It doesn't make the journey effortless, but it shows you the best route to take.

Time to Practice: Advocacy in Action

Pick one thing from this chapter that would help you at school. This week, take one step toward making it happen:

- Talk to a teacher about trying a new seating arrangement
- Ask your parents about setting up a 504 plan meeting
- Try a new organization system
- Request one specific accommodation
- Experiment with a different study method

Remember, school is just one part of your life. It's important, but it doesn't define you. Your worth isn't measured by grades or how well you fit into a system that wasn't designed for your brain.

You're learning to navigate a world that often doesn't make sense. That takes incredible strength, creativity, and resilience. Give yourself credit for that!

Chapter Nine

Digital Life and Social Media

Finding Balance

Let's talk about screens, social media, and digital life. This is your world—you've grown up with technology in a way previous generations didn't. But being autistic can make navigating digital spaces both easier and more complicated.

If you're spending more time thinking about screen time rules than actually doing stuff you enjoy, something's off! Let's figure out how to make technology work for you.

Why Digital Spaces Can Feel Easier

Ava is eleven and finds online communication way less stressful than face-to-face conversations. When she's texting or messaging, she has time to think about what she wants to say. She can edit her words before sending them. She doesn't have to worry about eye contact, facial expressions, or tone of voice. She can take breaks without it being awkward.

For Ava and many autistic tweens, digital communication removes some of the challenges that make in-person socializing exhausting. You can:

- **Process at your own pace:** No pressure to respond immediately in real-time
- **Edit before sending:** Time to get your words exactly right
- **Avoid sensory overload:** No loud voices, bright lights, or crowded spaces
- **Connect around interests:** Find people who share your passions, no matter where they live
- **Control your environment:** Engage when you have energy, step away when you need a break

These are real benefits. Digital spaces can be genuinely helpful for autistic people.

The Tricky Parts

But digital life also comes with challenges:

Misunderstandings happen more easily: Without tone of voice and facial expressions, it's harder to tell if someone is joking, being sarcastic, or genuinely upset. That "lol" might mean they think something is funny, or they might be uncomfortable and don't know what else to say.

It's easy to spend too much time online: When real-world socializing is exhausting, digital spaces can feel like a relief. But spending all your time online can make you feel disconnected and lonely in a different way.

Comparison is everywhere: Social media shows everyone's highlight reel. People post their best moments, not their struggles. It's easy to feel like everyone else has it figured out while you're still trying.

Mean behavior feels different: Cyberbullying can be really harmful because there's no escape. Mean comments stay visible. Screenshots get shared. It can follow you everywhere.

Privacy is complicated: Once you post something online, you can't fully control where it goes or who sees it.

Creating Your Digital Balance

Ava realized she needed to think more intentionally about her digital life when she noticed she was staying up until midnight scrolling through social media, then feeling exhausted and irritable the next day. She was spending more time watching other people's lives than living her own.

With help from her parents, Ava created some personal guidelines:

Time boundaries:

- No screens for the first 30 minutes after waking up (time to ease into the day)
- No screens for the last hour before bed (better sleep)
- Set a timer for social media—when it goes off, check in with herself about whether to continue or take a break

Content boundaries:

- Unfollow or mute accounts that make her feel bad about herself
- Follow accounts related to her interests (marine biology, art, autism advocacy)
- Limit exposure to news and upsetting content

Interaction boundaries:

- Don't engage with mean comments or arguments
- Take time to think before responding to anything that triggers strong emotions
- It's okay to ignore messages when she doesn't have energy to respond

These aren't rigid rules—they're guidelines that help Ava feel good about her digital life.

Social Media Reality Check

Let's talk about what you see on social media versus reality:

What you see: Everyone having perfect friend groups, going to parties, always looking happy and confident.

Reality: People post their best moments. You don't see the awkward parts, the times they felt left out, the moments they struggled. Everyone is figuring things out, including the people who look like they have it all together.

What you see: People who seem to have no problems, no challenges, no bad days.

Reality: Everyone has hard days. Everyone struggles with something. The difference is most people don't post about it.

What you see: Autistic people who seem to have everything figured out, who never struggle, who make it look easy.

Reality: Even autistic people who are great at self-advocacy and seem super confident have hard days. Growth isn't linear. Everyone is still learning.

When you find yourself comparing your real life to someone's social media life, remember: you're comparing your behind-the-scenes to their highlight reel. It's not a fair comparison.

Online Safety Basics

Let's cover some important safety stuff without being preachy about it:

Protect your personal information:

- Don't share your full name, address, phone number, or school name publicly

- Be careful about sharing photos that show identifying information (street signs, school logos, house numbers)
- Use privacy settings to control who can see your posts

Be skeptical:

- Not everyone online is who they say they are
- If someone seems too good to be true, they probably are
- Adults who want to be "friends" with tweens online are a red flag

Trust your gut:

- If something feels weird or uncomfortable, it probably is
- You can block people, leave conversations, or delete apps
- Talk to a trusted adult if something online makes you uncomfortable

Think before you post:

- Would you be okay with your parents, teachers, or future self seeing this?
- Could this hurt someone's feelings?
- Is this something you want permanently associated with you?

You don't have to be paranoid, but being thoughtful about online safety is smart.

When Online Friendships Feel More Real

Ava has friends at school, but her closest friend is someone she met in an online marine biology community. They've never met in person, but they message almost every day. They share articles about ocean conservation, discuss their favorite sea creatures, and support each other through hard times.

Ava's parents were worried at first. "Real friends are the ones you see in person," her mom said.

But Ava's online friendship is real. They have genuine connection, shared interests, and mutual support. The fact that it exists online doesn't make it less valuable.

Online friendships can be meaningful and important. Just make sure:

- You're still connecting with people in your physical world too
- You're following safety guidelines
- The friendship is balanced (you both give and receive support)
- The person respects your boundaries

Managing Digital Overwhelm

Even though digital spaces can feel easier than in-person socializing, they can still be overwhelming. Signs you might need a digital break:

- You feel anxious when you can't check your phone
- You're comparing yourself to others constantly
- You're staying up late scrolling
- You feel worse after spending time online
- You're avoiding real-world activities to stay online

- You're getting into arguments or drama online frequently

Try This! Experiment with a "digital sunset."

Pick a time each evening (maybe 8 PM or 9 PM) when you put your phone away for the night. Use that time for reading, art, journaling, or just relaxing. Notice how you feel.

Creating Content vs. Consuming Content

There's a big difference between creating content and consuming content. Creating—whether it's writing, drawing, making videos, coding, or anything else—uses your brain differently than scrolling and consuming.

If you love being online, consider shifting some of your time from consuming to creating:

- Start a blog about your special interest
- Make art and share it
- Create videos about topics you care about
- Write stories or fanfiction
- Code games or apps
- Build online communities around your interests

Creating gives you a sense of accomplishment and lets you contribute something meaningful.

Your Mission: Digital Life Audit

This week, pay attention to your digital life without judgment. Notice:

Time: How much time are you spending online? When are you online most?

Feelings: How do you feel before, during, and after being online? What activities make you feel good? What makes you feel bad?

Content: What are you doing online? Socializing? Learning? Creating? Mindlessly scrolling?

Balance: Are you missing out on other things you enjoy because of screen time?

After a week of noticing, decide if anything needs to change. Maybe you're happy with your digital life as it is. Maybe you want to adjust something. Either way, being intentional about it puts you in control.

The Bottom Line

Technology and social media aren't good or bad—they're tools. Like any tool, they can be used in ways that help you or ways that hurt you. The goal isn't to avoid digital life (that's not realistic or necessary). The goal is to use it intentionally in ways that make your life better.

You get to decide what that looks like for you!

Chapter Ten

Looking Forward

Your Autistic Future

Let's talk about your future. Not in a scary, overwhelming way—in an exciting, possibility-filled way. Being an autistic tween means you're figuring out who you are and who you want to become. That's big stuff, but you don't have to have it all figured out right now.

Future You is going to be pretty awesome. Current You is already pretty awesome. Let's make a plan that honors both.

Zoe's Sticky Note System

Zoe is twelve and loves planning. She has big dreams—she wants to be a veterinarian, learn three languages, travel to Japan, and write a book. But when she thought about all of that at once, it felt impossible and overwhelming.

Then Zoe discovered something that changed everything: breaking big dreams into tiny steps.

She bought a pack of colorful sticky notes and wrote one small action on each note:

- "Research what classes veterinarians take in college"
- "Learn five Japanese words"
- "Read one book about animal medicine"
- "Practice drawing animals for 15 minutes"

She stuck these notes on her wall and did one or two each week. Some weeks she did more, some weeks she did less. But slowly, her big dreams started feeling more real and less overwhelming.

That's the secret to thinking about your future: you don't have to do everything at once. You just have to take small steps in the direction you want to go.

Your Strengths Are Your Superpowers

Being autistic means your brain works differently, and different isn't bad—it's just different. In fact, many of the things that make you autistic can be incredible strengths:

Attention to detail: You notice things other people miss. This is valuable in fields like science, art, editing, programming, quality control, and so many others.

Deep focus: When you're interested in something, you can focus intensely for long periods. This ability to dive deep into topics is how experts are made.

Pattern recognition: Many autistic people are excellent at seeing patterns and connections. This is useful in math, music, coding, research, and problem-solving.

Honesty and directness: You say what you mean. In a world full of hidden meanings and social games, your straightforward communication is refreshing.

Loyalty: When you care about people or causes, you're deeply committed. You're a reliable friend and passionate advocate.

Unique perspective: You see the world differently, which means you come up with creative solutions others might not think of.

These aren't just nice things to say—they're real strengths that will serve you well in whatever future you create.

Autistic Adults Living Amazing Lives

Let's meet some autistic adults who are thriving:

Dr. Sarah Chen, Marine Biologist

Dr. Chen studies coral reefs and ocean ecosystems. Her ability to focus intensely on details helps her notice subtle changes in coral health that others might miss. She spends months at a time doing research at remote ocean sites—which works perfectly for her because she finds the quiet, structured environment of a research station much more comfortable than busy cities.

"Being autistic makes me a better scientist," Dr. Chen says. *"My brain is wired to notice patterns and details. I can spend hours observing the same section of reef and never get bored. That's exactly what this work requires."*

Dr. Chen also advocates for making science more accessible to autistic people. She mentors autistic students and pushes for accommodations in research settings.

Marcus Rivera, Auto Mechanic

Marcus owns his own auto repair shop. He discovered his love for fixing things when he was ten years old and took apart his bike to see how it worked. Now he diagnoses and repairs complex mechanical problems that other mechanics can't figure out.

"I can visualize how all the parts fit together," Marcus explains. *"When something's wrong, I can mentally trace through the systems until I find the problem. Plus, I genuinely love the work. I could spend all day working on engines."*

Marcus structured his business to work with his autistic brain. He takes fewer appointments per day so he's not rushed. He has a quiet office where he can take breaks. He hired someone else to handle customer service because that's not his strength. He focused on what he's good at and found ways to manage the rest.

Dr. Jamie Wong, Research Scientist

Dr. Wong develops new medical treatments in a pharmaceutical research lab. The work requires intense focus, attention to detail, and the ability to follow complex protocols precisely—all things that come naturally to Dr. Wong.

"I struggled socially in school," Dr. Wong shares. *"I felt like I didn't fit in anywhere. But I loved science. I spent all my free time reading about biology and chemistry. That passion led me to where I am now."*

Dr. Wong works in a lab with other scientists who share similar interests and communication styles. *"I found my people,"* Dr. Wong says. *"We're all a bit nerdy and direct. We care more about the science than small talk. It's perfect for me."*

Many Paths Forward

There's no single "right" path for autistic people. Your future might include:

College or university: Many autistic people thrive in higher education, especially when studying topics they're passionate about. Colleges often have disability services that provide accommodations.

Trade schools or apprenticeships: Learning hands-on skills in fields like welding, electrical work, culinary arts, or technology can be a great fit.

Starting your own business: Being your own boss means you can structure your work environment and schedule to fit your needs.

Creative careers: Art, writing, music, design, and other creative fields value unique perspectives and allow for flexible work arrangements.

STEM fields: Science, technology, engineering, and math often attract autistic people because they're based on logic, patterns, and systems.

Service careers: Some autistic people love helping others through healthcare, teaching, counseling, or social work.

And so many other options: The world is full of possibilities. Your path might look completely different from anyone else's, and that's okay.

Planning Without Pressure

Here's what you don't need to do right now:

- Pick your exact career
- Know where you'll go to college
- Have your whole life mapped out
- Be certain about everything

Here's what you can do right now:

- Explore your interests
- Try new things
- Learn about yourself
- Build skills
- Dream about possibilities

Think of your tween years as exploration time. You're gathering information about what you like, what you're good at, what energizes you, and what drains you. All of that information will help you make decisions later.

Let's Explore: Future Visioning

Grab your journal and imagine your life five years from now. Don't worry about being realistic—just dream:

- Where are you living?
- What are you spending your time doing?
- Who are the people in your life?
- What have you learned or accomplished?
- What makes you happy?
- What does a typical day look like?

Now think about what small steps might move you toward that vision. You don't need a detailed plan—just one or two things you could explore or try.

Building Your Support System

Whatever future you create, you don't have to do it alone. Start building your support system now:

Find mentors: Look for autistic adults or allies who can offer guidance and encouragement. This might be a teacher, counselor, family friend, or someone you connect with online.

Connect with other autistic people: Join online communities, local support groups, or autism-focused activities. Learning from others' experiences is invaluable.

Educate your allies: Help the people who support you understand what you need. The better they understand autism, the better they can help.

Develop self-advocacy skills: Keep practicing speaking up for yourself. This skill will serve you for your entire life.

Take care of your mental health: Find a therapist or counselor who understands autism. Having someone to talk to makes everything easier.

Your Autistic Identity

As you grow up, you'll keep learning about what being autistic means for you. Your relationship with your autistic identity might change over time, and that's normal.

Some autistic people see autism as a core part of who they are—inseparable from their identity. Others see it as one characteristic among many. Some people embrace autistic culture and community. Others don't connect with that as much.

There's no right way to be autistic. Your autistic identity is yours to define.

Quick Challenge: Letter to Future You

Write a letter to yourself five years from now. Tell Future You:

- What you're interested in right now
- What you're proud of
- What you're working on
- What you hope for them
- What advice you want them to remember

Seal it up and put it somewhere safe. Open it in five years and see how far you've come.

The Truth About Growing Up Autistic

Here's what I want you to know: Growing up autistic in a world designed for non-autistic people is hard. You'll face challenges. You'll have days when you feel frustrated, overwhelmed, or like you don't fit anywhere.

But you'll also discover your strengths. You'll find your people. You'll learn to advocate for yourself. You'll create a life that works for your brain. You'll do amazing things.

Being autistic doesn't limit your future—it shapes it in unique and valuable ways. The world needs autistic people. We need your attention to detail, your deep focus, your unique perspective, your honesty, your passion.

Your future is full of possibility. Take it one step at a time, be patient with yourself, and remember: you're not broken, you're not wrong, and you're definitely not alone.

The best part? You get to decide what your autistic future looks like. That's pretty exciting!

Conclusion

You made it! You've journeyed through ten chapters about being an autistic tween, and hopefully you've learned some things about yourself along the way.

Remember Dallas and her rock collection? She taught us that our special interests aren't weird—they're windows into how our brains work best. Amelia showed us that sensory experiences shape our world in important ways. Gillian, Maya, and Jade helped us understand that emotions are valid, even when they're big and complicated.

Florence, Zara, and Sophie reminded us that self-care isn't selfish—it's necessary. Liana showed us that our unique ways of seeing the world lead to amazing discoveries. Riley taught us about managing social energy. Olivia demonstrated the power of speaking up for ourselves. Lex proved that understanding how we learn makes everything easier. Ava helped us navigate digital life with intention. And Zoe showed us that big dreams become possible when we break them into small steps.

But here's the most important thing: this book isn't really about any of those characters. It's about you.

You're navigating a world that often doesn't make sense, using a brain that works differently, during a time of life that's already complicated for everyone. That takes incredible strength, creativity, and courage. Give yourself credit for that.

Being autistic isn't something to fix or overcome—it's part of who you are. Your autistic brain sees patterns others miss, focuses deeply on what matters to you, and experiences the world in vivid, intense ways. Those aren't flaws. They're features.

As you continue through your tween years and beyond, remember:

- Your needs are valid
- Your voice matters
- Your way of being is enough
- You deserve friendships that celebrate the real you
- You have the right to accommodations and support
- Your future is full of possibility

Keep exploring, keep learning about yourself, keep speaking up for what you need, and keep being authentically you. The world needs exactly that.

You've got this. And you're not alone.

Thank you

for reading my book!

I SINCERELY HOPE YOU enjoyed my book. I would love to hear your feedback! Won't you please take a moment to give my book an honest review? Simply scan the barcode below, which will take you to the product page where you can leave your comments.

Again, thank you!

Katie

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References and Further Reading

This book is based on the author's personal experiences supporting autistic family members and connecting with the autism community over more than two decades. The stories shared are composites drawn from real experiences, with identifying details changed to protect privacy.

While the author has consulted various resources about autism and relationships over the years, the primary expertise comes from lived experience rather than academic research. Readers seeking clinical information about autism spectrum disorder should consult qualified healthcare professionals.

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